

Fushi no Kami

REBUILDING CIVILIZATION

STARTS WITH A VILLAGE

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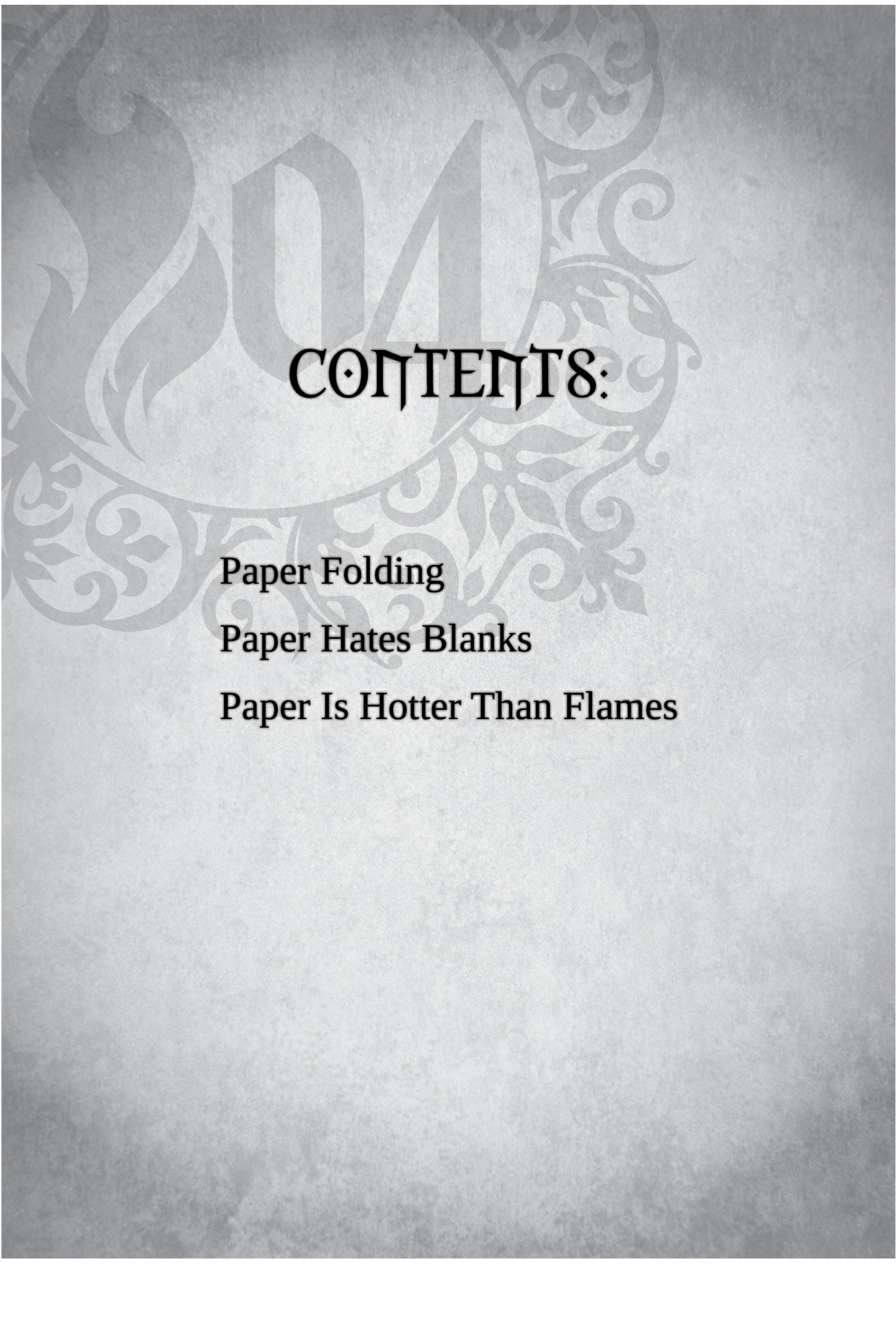
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Maika's Perspective

The spring breeze cooled down my hot body. I had just snatched victory from Glen. He had challenged me to a duel to celebrate our graduation from the military academy. In the past two years, our swords had crossed countless times. Because of that, I noticed that Glen looked more motivated and serious than usual when challenging me. And I had a vague idea of why that was. Now that our duel had finished, it was time for my suspicions to be confirmed.

"My plan was to tell you after I won, but..." After wiping the dirt and sweat off himself with a towel, Glen went down to his knees. "Maika, I have something to tell you."

"Yes, Glen." I straightened my posture and fixed my bangs to look more ladylike while listening to the words of the boy kneeling in front of me.

"I have liked you ever since I first saw you. I admire your smile, which is as beautiful as a flower, as well as your swordsmanship, which is as swift as the wind. So, would you please go out with me?"

Gosh... That makes me blush.

I felt nervous having someone like Glen confess his feelings to me so directly, even though I was pretty used to receiving love confessions. Back in the village, as well as here at the academy, some boys had told me things like, "Please become my wife" or "I love you." *I'm serious. I'm quite popular, you know? I hope you realize that too, Ash.*

Ahem... Anyways. Nonetheless, most of these confessions were made half-jokingly—they didn't really mind if they got rejected. And needless to mention, my feelings weren't so cheap that they would've been affected by such offhand confessions. Practically no one had the determination to muster up all their courage and confess while putting their feelings on the line as Glen had done just now. That was why I also needed to be serious.

“I cannot reciprocate your feelings.” I wasn’t going to talk in a roundabout way. I wasn’t going to apologize out of consideration either. I was just as serious as he was. I rejected his confession in the shortest and fastest way possible. “My heart belongs to someone else. Someone who was there before you, and someone more captivating than you. That’s why I cannot give it to you.”

Surely, Glen knew who I was talking about. And without a doubt, he must have also anticipated my answer. Still, he had decided to confess to me. He was shaking when he had told me about his long-held feelings. He must have been scared, knowing that he was going to get turned down. Glen must have been anticipating the pain of having his heart shattered to pieces. Imagining myself someday confessing my feelings to the person I liked, it wasn’t difficult to sympathize with him. Just thinking about it felt as if my chest were being crushed.

The boy who hadn’t given in to his fears concealed his pain with a smile. “I see. Thanks, Maika. What shall I say? It’s a huge weight off my shoulders.”

Seeing how he reacted in this situation, my honest opinion slipped out. “You’re really strong, Glen.”

He was the complete opposite of me.

I also mustered up all my courage and confessed my thoughts, which I usually did my best to hide. “You know, I’m actually quite weak,” I said.

By the look of things, Glen didn’t really believe me. Admittedly, it must have sounded a bit strange. After all, I had just beaten him in a sword fight.

“Really. Whenever I’m sad or I’m having a rough time, my chest tightens. It’s very painful and distressing. I hate the feeling.”

As a child, I disliked the dark and studying. Even now, I still hated seeing the faces of people who restrained themselves or had given up. I didn’t want to see them. I wanted to do something about them. And if I couldn’t do anything, I wanted someone else to act.

“I’m so weak and cowardly that I can’t even put up with such trivial things.”

I had become strong enough to beat the strongest boy in our entire year, but when it came down to my feelings, I was still the same as always. I knew better

than anyone how weak my mind still was.

“That’s why I admire anyone strong enough to never make me feel that way.”

Someone who, as a child, took my hand when I was frightened of the creeping darkness on my way home in the evening. Someone who erased everything that I hated and made me scared. The weak side of me wanted to always stay warm and in a bright mood right beside that person.

“You see, I’m a pretty spoiled girl.”

In all honesty, I expected anyone who knew this to loathe me. It was quite depressing, after all. I was like a selfish princess who wanted to have all the bad things dealt with, even though she herself was a coward afraid of the dark. I was sure that, under normal circumstances, I would’ve never ever fallen in love. I would have found a fault in every boy that came along. No matter how wonderful, he wouldn’t have lived up to my ideals.

I wanted someone who kept me warm on a cold night, like the flame of a fireplace. Someone who illuminated the way back to my safe home on a scary night, like a bright torch.

The dreaded night always came, and the light of the stars was too pale to illuminate the path I was bound to walk on. I was shrouded in darkness, paralyzed at my feet. My ideal man was someone capable of conquering the eternal night, for which no flame or light was bright enough. I only managed to fall in love because the person I liked wasn’t normal.

Recently, in the village where I was born, the number of residents kept increasing. All thanks to the decrease in deaths from hunger and illness. My mom was also as energetic as ever, taking command. Our friend, who had only shown a sad smile when we first met, had become more cheerful in front of our eyes as we spent time together. The boy, who had been on the brink of getting crushed by his own dreams, had managed to pursue those dreams and soar through the skies.

The person I liked transformed our reality with the brilliance of a warm light shining in a previously cold and dark world. And once you had known his warmth, you wanted to spend the rest of your life under his light only.

“There is nothing wrong with you at all, Glen. Thank you for liking me,” I said to the person who had confessed to me. “But there’s only ever been—and there can only ever be—one person who my weak self can come to like.”

I was only able to live beside that sunlike, red-haired boy. Like a flower that only blossomed under the sun.

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“Dear Ash,

“The wind blowing over the capital has become lukewarm, signaling the transition from spring to summer. I imagine spring must have already come to Sacula too. Remembering Sacula’s spring as I write this letter, I feel like it was more vibrant than those in the capital. Everything ranging from the colors, to the smells, to the sounds.

“I want to go back to Sacula. You might say, ‘Already?’ but here in the capital... Well, there’s no point going into further details. Don’t worry, I’m also having fun. His Excellency the Count of Sacula is very friendly, and I get along quite well with the maids and servants surrounding me too. Oh, yeah, I also talked with Father Folke. We were on the same wavelength, just as expected from someone who taught you and Maika. So yeah, there are fun things over here as well. But of course, it can’t compare to the time I spent with you in Sacula...

“His Excellency told me a bit about the situation in Sacula. He said that there will be a new department headed by you and Maika. I should probably be saying, ‘Well done,’ but for some reason, I also feel proud myself. After all, the department was put in place to press forward with both the agricultural development plan and the industrial development plan, right? As someone who helped come up with these plans, I feel like it isn’t too strange for me to think of the new department as my achievement too.

“It makes me incredibly happy to see how our joint efforts are coming to fruition. My heart is pounding, and I feel energized. Thank you for spending that time with me. And thank you for carrying on our work. I’ll also make sure to carry on with it here in the capital. Hopefully you’ll be pleased too.

“Now, going straight to the point, I’ve sent you some books that I found at the

royal city temple. Since I started by looking at agriculture-related books, there are hardly any manufacturing-related ones. I can already imagine Hermes sulking and pouting. Please reassure him—he can expect more from me together with the next letter! Ah, maybe it's better if we leave that task to Reina? Let her know I said hi.

“Anyway, this is about it for the first letter. I'll try to send the next one as soon as possible. That way I can expect you to reply right away! Sorry, I was just joking—don't push yourself if you're busy. You always pretend to be fine, but most of what you do—or rather, everything you do—is reckless. I'll also write Maika to tell her to keep you in check.

“Promise me you definitely won't do anything unreasonable or reckless!

“Sincerely,

“Your roommate.”

After I had finished reading the letter from my faraway friend, I put it away in the drawer of my desk. If I had opened the window, I would have been greeted by a spring breeze. This was the third spring that I was spending at the dormitory, but this year I did not have a roommate.

“Morning, Ash!”

Lady Maika suddenly appeared as if to drive away my melancholy. Since we were childhood friends, she felt comfortable entering my room without knocking. Of course, I always knocked before entering hers. Unless you found yourself inside a romantic comedy, opening a girl's room door without knocking equaled closing the door of your life.

“Breakfast is ready! I've come to pick you up!”

“Thank you. I did not realize it was already this late.”

“Yep. I'm hungry, so let's not lose any time! Now that you mention it, it's unusual for you to be late in the morning. Did you oversleep?”

“No, there was a letter from Arthur mixed in with the early morning delivery.”

“O-Oh, I got one too. I'm glad he's doing fine.”

“Yes, indeed.”

Side-by-side we walked through the corridor of the dormitory. Even after turning thirteen and completing the military academy, I was still living on the ground floor of the dormitory. *And no, I didn't fail to graduate.* Since there were not many new students, I was just helping out to effectively use an available room. In exchange for me agreeing to be an assistant to the dormitory supervisor, they covered rent and food expenses for me.

From what I had gathered from Lord Itsuki and Lady Maika, who seemed to be pulling the strings, the former had been willing to fully pay for my expenses during my stay here, but I had respectfully declined. There was a saying, “The freeloader only shyly asks for the third bowl of rice.” One should not take too much advantage of excessive kindness. What might look like a bottomless fountain could still dry up if you drew too much water. Therefore, I had told him, “If you have money to spare, please increase the funding of our projects instead.” And when I checked the budget documents later, the funding had indeed increased. This went to show that, sometimes, all you had to do was ask. Either way, it appeared that there was still plenty of water left in that fountain.

“But are you sure that you do not want to live at the mansion?” I asked Lady Maika.

Lord Itsuki had shed bitter tears at having the opportunity to live under the same roof as his beloved niece snatched away right in front of his eyes. The pretext had been to provide her education as a prospective successor of the count.

“Yeah, don't worry! You see... Um... The dorm's supervisor also needs an assistant for the girls! As a boy, you can't really get involved in those issues!”

“Well, you are right about that.”

While we were only in our early teens, it was still appropriate to be cautious when dealing with girls at this age, since it could lead to various sensitive issues.

“So just leave that to me! I'll somehow deal with my uncle and make sure to stay on his good side!”

“I see you have everything under control. I am counting on you.”

When it came to Lady Maika, Lord Itsuki was as moldable as fluff. I was glad to have her on my side.

As I showed my appreciation for Lady Maika's capabilities, she looked up at me with a smile on her face.

"Is something wrong?" I asked.

"Nothing, I was just thinking how tall you've become."

"Oh, yes. I have grown a bit."

Maybe it was due to the fact that I had been eating more meat since coming to the city, but I had grown so much that even I was aware of it myself. Especially since my line of sight had become higher than Lady Maika's, who was always next to me.

"You've finally overtaken me. How does that feel?"

"Hmm."

A lot of things had become more convenient. With a stronger and taller body, it was easier to carry heavy objects. And also, how should I put it... I was happy to look more like a proper young man, and maybe even felt a little sense of superiority.

"It comes with the bonus of looking at your cute face with your upturned eyes."

Boys were simple creatures in the end. I thought so while being one myself.

"I-I see. I-I also like looking up at you. You look even more caring."

"I am glad to hear that."

Some people may have been slightly pissed if their childhood friend overtook them in height, but luckily, Lady Maika was a kind childhood friend. *By the way, your face is bright red.*



“W-We’ve arrived at the cafeteria. It’s time for our job as assistants! Everyone, are you ready to eat?”

There were three types of replies coming from this year’s students, who were all waiting at the cafeteria. The extroverted students gave an energetic response. The serious ones answered in a moderate tone. And those who did not know how to respond either stayed silent or replied late.

“Anyone have any problems? Like not having any appetite or feeling ill? If you do, please report it to me or Ash, or the dormitory supervisor, Lady Kei. You can tell us later too.” Lady Maika switched to work mode and asked those questions.

Several students looked this way. Since none of them raised their voices, she announced the start of the meal. “Let us thank the chef and everyone who was in charge of helping him today before eating breakfast.” After saying their thanks, everyone started eating.

As Lady Kei’s assistants, we sat down at the same table as the dormitory supervisor. While Mrs. Rihn had been the supervisor during our time at the academy, she was no longer in charge this year. Kei was the name of the new supervisor.

“Good morning, Kei.”

“Good morning, Ash. Maika, thank you for the morning address.”

“It’s part of my job as an assistant. Leave it to me, Ms. Supervisor!”

“Ha ha ha, if it weren’t for you two, I definitely wouldn’t be able to do this job.”

Lady Kei looked truly innocent in her brand-new maid outfit. No wonder, considering that she was a fresh recruit who had just graduated from the academy. Or in other words, she was a former classmate. Usually, the job of dormitory supervisor was left to a more veteran maid with experience and skill, but given certain circumstances, Lady Kei had been selected.

Those circumstances included, for instance, the fact that there were fewer students compared to the previous year, where a big-name student had drawn

a lot of attention, or the fact that veteran maids like Mrs. Rihn had to deal with the sudden increase in new technology over the past two years. Moreover, students from our year were so highly trusted that they were referred to as “the best in the history of the academy.” And I had heard people say that, “With such capable assistants, there should not be any problems.”

“It does seem difficult to suddenly become a dormitory supervisor, but I think you are the right person for the job.”

“You think so? Every day’s a mess, though...”

“Well, your work is appreciated. You know which students to talk to afterwards, right?”

“Ah, yeah. There were three students who looked troubled when Maika asked those questions earlier. If they’re just not feeling well, I can deal with that. But if they want any advice from me, I’m not sure I can help them. It appears that there’s already some love in the air...”

As I looked at Lady Maika, she signaled her approval with an okay sign. Lady Kei had an extremely keen eye for those kinds of things. No wonder Lady Maika gave her approval and Mrs. Rihn had recommended her for the position. *But everyone’s so young! And talking about love interests already!*

Lady Maika had a similar reaction, saying, “Already? They’re starting early.”

“Are you in a position to say that, Maika?”

As Lady Kei grinned at her, Lady Maika hastily added to her previous remarks, “B-But I guess it’s not too strange. Especially considering that some of them must have known each other before coming here.”

“That’s right. A lot of students have been encouraged by their parents to bring back a partner, so maybe they have their eyes set on someone they’ve already known since childhood,” Lady Kei said.

“Y-Yeah. That stuff also happened in our class, right?”

“There were some sinful people, weren’t there?” Lady Kei had a big grin on her face.

Apparently, she still loved this kind of talk. According to the boys from our

class, she had always been at the center of every talk regarding love interests during our time at the academy too.

Since it was not really my place to join their conversation, I focused on my meal until one of the students came to talk to me. “Um, Ash?”

“Yes? Good morning, Luka.”

Hearing my formal reply, Lady Luka slightly panicked. “I-I’m sorry, Mr. Ash.”

Very well done.

I was not here in my private time, after all. Currently, I was here as the dormitory’s assistant supervisor, rather than as a fellow villager. Yes, Lady Luka was indeed an exchange student from Noscula village. She was the third exchange student to come here after the study group meetings had started at that battered church. By the way, there was a fourth one among this year’s class as well. Both of their expenses were covered by the village’s funds and a contribution from Mr. Quid.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Um... I was in charge of today’s breakfast, so... How was it?”

“It was very delicious. You get a gold star.”

As I praised her while patting her head like I used to do at the village, Lady Luka’s face lit up. Back then, she had always come to me to report anything. Before I knew it, she had grown attached to me.

At the same time that Lady Luka showed her smile, Lady Maika’s disappeared. “Ash, do you want to eat dinner at the mansion tonight? For some reason, I really feel like cooking.”

“Today? I do not mind, but we need to check with the mansion and our schedule first... What do you say, Kei?”

Upon hearing my question, Lady Kei’s grinning intensified, and she gave us an okay sign with both her hands. “I’ll take care of things here, so enjoy yourselves, you sinners.”

What sin could someone as virtuous as me have possibly committed? Maybe the original sin, given my passionate love for the fruit of knowledge?

Renge's Perspective

The knocking sound reverberated as if to express my own nervousness. I must have been imagining things. I had knocked on the door just as I had been taught during my maid training. What I heard must have been my own heartbeat.

"Come in," Ms. Ran's voice echoed from the inside.

I took another deep breath before opening the door to the count's office. Inside, the acting count, Lord Itsuki, looked at me with a troubled face over some documents. Next to him, Ms. Ran, his personal maid, was sitting at a desk near the door.

"Over here. How can I help you?"

"Y-Yes. Sorry for intruding, Ms. Ran." I walked towards her desk and presented a document. "This is a written report from the Territory Reform Promotion Office. It lists the areas that saw large fluctuations in their harvest yields and compares them to previous years."

It was the latest version of the task that I had performed together with Ash and Lord Arthur last year. Originally, harvest yields had only ever been compared with the previous year when establishing the budget. However, since Ash and Lord Arthur had turned it into a bigger task by proposing to compare them with many previous years, it was relayed to the newly established Territory Reform Promotion Office. Given Lord Arthur's departure to the royal capital, Ash and I were at the head of the office. It was my first and current job after the reshuffling of the personnel.

In addition to conducting follow-up observations of Adele, Ajole, Torade, and Sekuba—the four villages that had shown large fluctuations last year—we had also added three new villages to our report. All three had shown large fluctuations in harvest yields as well.

I patiently waited for Ms. Ran's to speak while she quickly scanned through the report. Strangely enough, my nervousness from earlier was now slowly fading away. Until last year, I would have never anticipated that a newbie and

underling like me was going to deliver documents directly to the acting count. My chest had hurt from nervousness, but remembering how laboriously Ash and I had put these documents together, I was able to calm down.

“You have shown a good attitude today,” Ms. Ran murmured with her eyes fixed on the documents in front of her. “When submitting the report, you didn’t stutter at all.”

“Wh-What? R-Really?”

“Now you did.”

Just when I thought I was going to receive some praise, I went and messed it up again. But I wondered if I really hadn’t stuttered earlier. I had always been poor at communicating, and at some point, stuttering had become a bad habit of mine. Moreover, even though I was aware of it myself, it had taken a turn for the worse in the past two years.

As I remembered why my stutter had worsened, Ms. Ran stood up and walked towards Lord Itsuki’s desk. “Lord Itsuki, this is the report from the Territory Reform Promotion Office. It is very well-written.”

“Hm. As expected, then.” Lord Itsuki grinned as he accepted the document. He was a very easygoing person, just like Ash had said. “Well done, Renge. It must be hard to keep up with Ash.”

“Y-Yes. But it’s very fulfilling work, so it’s fine. I think...”

“There is nothing more promising than hearing you say that after working with Ash. No wonder he values you so highly.”

“Th-Thank you.”

My cheeks flushed. To think that I of all people was in a leading position, and even a founder of a newly established office that the acting count himself had set his eyes on...

There were rumors flying around saying, “The Territory Reform Promotion Office is essentially just Ash’s baby,” but Ash himself had explicitly wanted me to be a part of it. I was happy when he had invited me, but I even became emotional when I heard that Ash had recommended me to Lord Itsuki too. *I’m*

going to work even harder! I discreetly fired myself up by making a fist.

“Hm, I thought the same thing when I first saw the fluctuation, but it’s much easier to put it into perspective when reading it like this. Adele and Torade just happened to suffer from bad luck last year.”

“Yes, Adele was attacked by beasts and Torade suffered from water damage. In both cases, it was just a temporary misfortune,” I elaborated.

“Telling them to keep their spending in check would be a cruel joke. We collected more than enough taxes from them in previous years. As a statesman, I can’t put this in the same category as villages that continuously yield poor harvests.”

“Yes, it is no wonder that last year’s report was accompanied by a petition for tax reductions.”

“I remember some council members objecting, but I’m sure they will realize that last year’s tax reduction was a good investment when looking at this year’s improved numbers.”

Ms. Ran nodded along and confirmed the statements of Lord Itsuki, who pointed out the numbers in the report with a satisfied look on his face.

“This method is extremely useful. Maybe we should consider employing it in other fields too,” Ms. Ran proposed.

“Hm. It’s not that simple. This work requires a lot of effort and skill,” Lord Itsuki remarked.

“Yes, that is why we should adequately reward the Territory Reform Promotion Office, who volunteered that effort and skill this time.” Ms. Ran said while looking at me.

“Of course. Renge, I imagine it must have been a difficult task. It’s a new department, you have to work with Ash, the work covers a wide range of areas, there are a lot of new recruits, and above anything, you have to work with Ash. In addition, you don’t have any connections to other departments or outside entities, and not to forget that you have to work with Ash!”

Um, you mentioned working with Ash several times?

Nevertheless, Ms. Ran didn't seem to find anything wrong with that—she just nodded along.

“However, as acting count, I very much value hard yet extremely promising work. I hope you will use this experience to grow even further.”

“I have to concur as one of your superiors, Renge. Active duty maids with experience as the founder of a new department are scarce. You will become an exceptionally reliable maid if you keep growing at this rate.”

I-I'm humbled, but that praise is wasted on someone like me. N-No, I mean, of course I'm doing my best, so I appreciate their words. And most of all, it's a fulfilling job for me too, so I'm happy, but...

“Hm, just looking at her, she seems to be a reserved and timid person, but...” Lord Itsuki began.

“Renge is strong-willed. There is nothing to worry about,” Ms. Ran reassured him.

“I mean, she is able to keep up with Ash. Even I can't make light of that fact.”

Wh-What? Ash truly is incredible, but it's not like I'm keeping up with him. Rather, it's him dragging me along. I haven't really done much...

I was happy that Ms. Ran and Lord Itsuki were praising me, but it was all the result of Ash's work, so I faltered and shrunk back.

“Isn't it amazing that a young maid is able to handle Ash's power and work with him?” Lord Itsuki asked.

“Yes, definitely. Just look at Mrs. Rihn. She is a veteran, and yet look how she handled it.”

“She snapped into two...”

“I did not think I would ever see the perfect superwoman Mrs. Rihn like that...”

“Let's place our hopes in Renge.”

“I will help however I can.”

Both of them continued to take turns praising me until I left the room.

Feeling that my serious facial expression had started to crumble from all the praise, I rubbed both my cheeks. *I'm happy! Really!*

Lord Itsuki was going to become the next count, or in other words, he was the second most important person in all of Sacula. He was beloved among the maids and knights, and there seemed to be no worries regarding his future reign among the citizens.

As his personal maid, Ms. Ran was destined to be the next head of maids. She was skilled and appreciated enough to be entrusted with that position as soon as Lord Itsuki officially became count. There was no way I wouldn't have been happy to receive praise from people like them. But they shouldn't have been pampering me this much...

As my mind kept going in circles, I finally calmed down and regained my usual composure. I took another deep breath before knocking on the door of the Territory Reform Promotion Office. Inside, Ash was swiftly dealing with some documents, as usual.

It was gratifying to see him like that. I felt the need to immediately inform him that Lord Itsuki had praised the report to the skies. "Ash, I submitted the report to Lord Itsuki. He was very pleased with it. He said it was going to be useful as a reference going forward."

"I am glad to hear that. We did not work for nothing." Ash's smile seemed even brighter than usual when he answered. It subconsciously made me smile too.

"Y-Yes!"

For some reason, I felt happier seeing Ash pleased and hearing him say that it was a result of our work than I was from receiving praise from Lord Itsuki and Ms. Ran. I even felt hot.

"Well then, let us continue with the next task. Continuing on from last year, we need to write a request for tax reduction."

So, if Ash said that he wanted to work even more, naturally I felt motivated as well. "U-Understood! But tax reduction?"

“Exactly. Officially, it is to support the reconstruction of the villages. Do you remember how Torade and Adele were exempt from paying taxes last year to help with the rebuild? We will suggest repeating that this year.”

That was great news for the villages that had suffered from natural disasters. They may have regained their footing this year, but they still had not fully recovered, so paying taxes would have been tough on them.

Although, was that really all right? Just earlier, I had heard Lord Itsuki and Ms. Ran talking about some members of the council in charge of approving the budget opposing that idea.

“W-Won’t it be an issue to do it...t-two years in a row...? L-Last year’s complete tax exemption was already more than generous. W-We should be grateful for that.”

I hadn’t been able to stop myself from adding personal feelings into my statement. Adele village was my birthplace, after all. Even now, my father was still the village chief. He lived there with my siblings. And I also had some friends there... That was why I had felt so motivated to help when Ash had first started to research the previous years’ yields. Especially when he had said that it might help support Adele village. Eventually, as a result of our efforts, Adele was very much saved by the tax exemption. It had allowed them to rebuild the fields and increase their harvest yield over the past year. I was proud of that work.

At the same time, it felt like a stake in my heart. While Adele and Torade, whose yields had decreased due to unfortunate disasters, had been exempt from paying taxes, Ajole and Sekuba, whose crops had failed over a longer period of time, had not been exempt. Of course, my personal connection with Adele had nothing to do with that decision—it was a fair judgment made after examining their past harvest yields. And surely, neither Ash nor Lord Itsuki had exerted any influence either. In fact, Ash shouldn’t even have known that I was born in Adele. And while Lord Itsuki must have had access to that information in his position, I didn’t know if he had checked that thoroughly. In the end, the council members had been convinced purely by numbers and not by any personal feelings.

Even still, it was a stake in my heart. The face of my childhood friend from Ajole kept popping up in my head. We had parted ways after a fight. Objectively, there was no fraud involved. However, there was an unpleasant weight on my chest, as if it were filled with cold water.

“Nevertheless, I think that is the best course of action. This should produce better long-term results.” With those cheerful words, Ash tried pushing away my personal guilt.

He continued to explain what other benefits could be expected from the tax reduction. The count’s reputation was sure to improve after word of a tax reduction in response to natural disasters got out. Any farmers afraid of such disasters would be reassured that they could expect help from above. And surely, that would lead to an increased motivation to hoe their fields.

“Those are the reasons why I think we should continue our support. Or to summarize it, you could say that by showing the count’s generosity, you increase the citizen’s sense of belonging to the territory.”

“Their sense of belonging?”

“Humans tend not to cherish things that they do not consider their own. From small things like coins to bigger ones like plots of land and countries. A sense of belonging makes them think of the plot of land as their own.”

While Ash did not include any personal feelings and only relied on numbers to request a tax reduction, he still factored human emotions into his plan. Ash had no connection to Adele or Torade. Without a doubt, he must have had a very weak sense of belonging to those places.

“I-I see. I didn’t realize those motives existed.”

For that reason, I realized how generous Ash was and how narrow-mindedly I thought. Even though I had a sense of belonging to my hometown, I had not been able to come up with a solution until Ash showed me the way.

As I regretfully dropped my shoulders, Ash tilted his head with a calm facial expression. It was like his warm smile invited me to bring up my concerns.

Ash really was a strange person. Although he was younger than me, he was so reliable. I leaned on him and spoke out to release the cold discomfort deep

inside my chest.

“T-To tell the truth, I-I’m from Adele.”

I had said it. Now even Ash might end up being disillusioned with me. I had told myself over and over that there had been no wrongdoings, but I knew very well that it wasn’t fair.

“Oh, I did not know that. You must have been quite worried, then.”

And yet, Ash naturally sympathized with the plight of my hometown.

“A-Are you not angry?”

“Why? Did you do something to make me angry?”

Seeing him ask me with such a gentle expression on his face, I felt like I wanted to depend on him even further—until the stake was pulled from my heart.

“I-I mean, it’s as if I used my position to help my hometown...”

“Ah, I see. You were worrying about that this whole time.” As I opened myself up to him, Ash replied with a gentle smile. “This task was entrusted to you with the approval of your supervisor as well as the acting count Lord Itsuki, who judged you to be the most qualified person for the job.”

His kind words started dissolving the stake in my heart...

“And as your work colleague, I can attest that you did not make any blunders. You have an extremely enthusiastic attitude towards your work, and your seriousness leaves nothing to be desired. If by any chance your work ethic resulted from your personal feelings, then they manifested themselves in a most appropriate manner.”

...until it had completely disappeared.

As if by magic, the pain subsided, and my tense shoulders loosened up again. I was surprised at how much I had actually suffered from that stake in my heart.

“A-Ah... U-Um... Th-Thank you...A-Ash... Y-You don’t have to p-praise me that much.”

“You worked diligently, so I will praise you as much as I like.” It was amazing

how Ash knew exactly what to say. “Renge, you are a wonderful person.”

“What?! N-Not at all! I-If anything you are much more wonderful.”

I was not even in the same league as him.

“No, it is laudable how you sympathize with the suffering of others and try to show kindness, even though you are experiencing hardships yourself.”

I was not kind at all. I only felt guilty about Ajole village because of my own cowardice. I knew this all too well. A different stake that was still stuck in my heart started stinging.

“If I had a magic pocket that produced biscuits whenever I tapped it, I would happily distribute biscuits to everyone. However...” he began.

Ash’s metaphor was as sweet as fantastic. Indeed, one could not help but wonder what would have been possible if magic like that existed.

However, Ash’s smile disappeared as he began to talk about reality, which heavily contrasted with his made-up example. “Unfortunately, no one has such a pocket in this world. What is more, you have to support as many people as possible with the contents of a small pocket. And that number is not based on compassion and kindness, but hard facts and reason.”

I knew the coldness of that reality. I had experienced it in the past, and I was still experiencing it now. The coldness squeezed my heart.

In contrast, Ash appeared to easily swallow that ice-like reality. “In the end, though, it is due to a lack of ability. Although that is not really something you can say out loud. If possible, I would love to save everyone in the world. Of course, that would feel much more pleasant.”

It was as though he cheerfully told me that one had to swallow even the things they didn’t like—that it was necessary. And that then, afterwards, you could melt them inside your stomach.

I realized that we were quite different, after all. He had the strength to swallow this reality as cold as ice and melt it inside himself.

“You may feel guilty, but in that case, we should work towards making that pocket bigger. That way, you will not have such a troubled conscience next

time.”

“You can make the pocket bigger?”

“Of course.”

Ash’s smile was as warm as always.

● ● ●

While Lady Renge and I were writing the tax exemption request, Lady Maika came to the office. Considering that she was also part of the staff, maybe I should have said she “returned to,” but “came to” was no doubt more appropriate in this case.

“Hi, Ash, Renge. Things have finally calmed down a bit.”

“Much appreciated, Chief Maika.”

Lady Maika showed a wry smile, expressing a mixture of joy and disappointment when she heard me call her by her job title.

“I’m still not used to that title; just call me by my name as usual.”

“But I need to properly treat you as my superior during work.”

“No way!”

As I tried to protest again, she sat down at her desk. On top of said desk, there was a sign that read, “Territory Reform Promotion Office Chief.” Since I had been appointed as a staff member to this office, she was my direct superior.

“That’s too much responsibility for me! You’d be a much better fit for this job.”

“Not at all, Chief Maika. You are much better suited to be in a position of power.”

“Oh, you’re such a smooth talker!” While Lady Maika pouted and complained, it actually seemed like my praise had left her in a good mood.

Reaching a managerial position at the young age of thirteen was considered a precocious success even in this world. Of course, there were good reasons for it.

The Territory Reform Promotion Office for this remote region had been established this winter. Its main duty was to take care of the tasks related to the agriculture development plan and industrial development plan, such as management, administration, implementation, and adjustments. In other words, the plans that we had developed during our time at the academy had been completely delegated to this department. In addition, with Lady Maika and me at the top, followed by Lady Reina, Hermes, and several others from our study group, most of the personnel of the office had been enlisted from the academy. Outsiders like Lady Renge were exceptions.

It was as if the student body of the academy had been transplanted directly into an official office. Even I had my concerns regarding this process. But when I had voiced them to Lord Itsuki, the man bearing the great burden of being the acting count, he had proudly proclaimed, “Well, I guess I can’t leave it to anyone else. And it’s not like anyone else can keep up with you. Besides, one shouldn’t carelessly mix toxic substances together, right?”

That did not sound very decisive to me. *What do you mean by “Well, I guess?”* Although there was no reason for me to waste energy opposing this arrangement, which, at the end of the day, was also the most convenient for me. There was even less incentive for me to object when considering that putting Lady Maika in charge was in part a scheme to train her in her responsibilities as a blood relative of the count. Her teacher and, by extension, the real supervisor of the Territory Reform Promotion Office was the acting count himself, Lord Itsuki. In fact, Lady Maika had spent most of today at his office, which is why it was more appropriate to say that she had finally “come to,” not “returned to,” our office.

Still, that only made things better. The general was constantly in the direct line of fire, which luckily also allowed the horse to avoid a meaningless death. Considering how convenient this all was, I decided not to intervene and allow the euphoric expression of the acting count, who got to work together with his beloved niece.

In any case, since Lady Maika had finally arrived, I hastily finished the documents and stood up. “I think it is time we go check up on the progress of the laboratory.”

“Yay, a small trip with Ash!” Lady Maika happily exclaimed.

At the laboratory, Lady Reina, the head of management, and Hermes, the head of manufacturing, were waiting for us. First of all, Hermes lined up several fairly large cans. Lady Reina proceeded to explain the contents and detailed the manufacturing date one by one.

“From right to left, we have cooked meat, boiled vegetables, and fruits preserved in syrup. The top column is three months old, the middle one is two months, and the bottom ones are from last month.”

Lady Maika and I looked at the cans in sequential order and let out a sigh.

“Looks like another failure.”

How frustrating. I put a lot of effort into this canned food development plan, but none of the cans had preserved their contents. Either the insides had become rusty or they had exploded.

“Did no one get hurt? Some look really deformed.” Lady Maika looked like a true leader as she confirmed everyone’s safety.

As for me, I was too discouraged to even think about this.

“Yes, we’re all fine. However, the contents were scattered all around the place, so I imagine it would be dangerous if they exploded around people.”

“I see. We need to be cautious, then.”

Since they were used to failures of this degree, neither Lady Maika nor Lady Reina were discouraged. If anything, Hermes seemed worried to see me so openly disheartened.

“It’s unusual to see you this depressed. What’s the matter? Compared to the failures of the stove and the water wheel, this doesn’t seem like a big deal.”

“You may be right, but I expected this to easily succeed, so I am extremely disappointed.”

After all, I had thought that it was enough to make a container out of aluminum and steel, add the contents, heat it all in a water bath or over an open fire, and finally seal the lid while it was still hot. Sealing the lid had been

extremely difficult, but we had somehow managed to solder it with tin, making full use of the prototype furnace.

Sure, I had had my doubts in regard to long-term preservation over several months. Our high-temperature pasteurization was probably insufficient, and the can was not perfectly hermetically sealed. Regardless, I had not anticipated such a crushing defeat. First and foremost, the fact that there was rust—or in other words, corrosion—inside, already indicated that it was a failure as a preservation can.

I clearly remembered that canned foods had been preserved in aluminum and steel cans in my past life, but maybe they had an extra layer on the inside? Like a coating to prevent corrosion. The more I learned about cans, the more impressive they appeared. They were simple and commonplace items in my past life, but at the same time also ingenious contraptions. I wondered what bright ideas had gone into making mere canned foods. Just thinking about it made me tremble with excitement.

“Unbelievable—you’ve already recovered again. You were brooding moments ago...”

Upon hearing Hermes voice his admiration, I came back to my senses. I looked up and saw everyone’s awkward smiles.

“Just as you’d expect from Ash. Recovering from an unusual slump all by himself,” Lady Reina remarked.

“There wasn’t even any time for me to comfort him...” Lady Maika murmured. This time she was the one in low spirits.

It appeared that I had caused some trouble. Anyways, as the plan’s original proponent, I had to inform them of the fact that we would not be able to make canned food for the time being.

“I am afraid that, for now, I have no more ideas for improving the manufacturing of preserved foods using aluminum and steel cans. So, with a heavy heart, I propose...” I dropped my shoulders and sighed. “I propose to use glass jars instead.”

On top of breaking easily, glass was harder to produce than metal cans in our

current environment, so I had tried avoiding this method, but there was no longer any way around it. We needed preserved foods right away, for both the soldiers patrolling the territory day by day as well as myself, since I was planning to travel all over the place too.

“It is the same principle as the metal cans. However, the material necessary for the lid... Is something wrong?”

As I looked around, I once again saw everyone putting on an awkward smile.
Is this déjà vu?

“Just as you’d expect from Ash.” Hermes repeated his line from earlier and smiled at Lady Reina, who was standing next to him.

She reciprocated in a cheerful yet exasperated voice. “Yes, indeed. He immediately comes up with a backup plan, not leaving us any time to be discouraged.”

“You’re taking the words out of my mouth. But glass jars? I don’t think anyone here can make those,” he said.

Hermes surveyed the scene, but as expected, even the prisoners shook their heads. Still, we did have some ceramic craftsmen.

“Right. So, could you please make porcelain jars for the time being? I will try to find a way to obtain glass,” I told them.

I was probably going to ask Mr. Quid to import some glass jars that could be used as prototypes. Manufacturing glass took a lot of time and effort, so it was probably better to wait until after conducting some trials.

Since everyone seemed to agree with that proposal, I moved on to the next topic with a clap of my hands. “Next up, Hermes, how is the lathe?”

“It’s fun!”

I’m glad to hear that, but that’s not exactly what I wanted to know. Although I guess it implies everything’s going smoothly.

As I was not sure how to proceed, faced with his big smile, Lady Reina came to the rescue. She stepped on Hermes’s foot, which made his smile disappear. “Hermes, that’s not what he was asking. You know that, right?”

“A-Ah, y-yeah. Um, well, it’s quite stable now, after fixing the problems that I encountered while making the metal cans. And I’ve probably gotten more used to it.”

I had introduced the lathe as part of the industrial development plan to improve our manufacturing abilities. Its structure was fairly simple, but it had an adaptability that turned it into an all-purpose tool. In a world where everything from filing to cutting relied on human strength, it truly was a revolutionary machine. However, there were still some problems in regard to its motive power.

Hermes elaborated on the issues while scratching his cheek. “Since it’s powered by the water wheel, there are some days when it requires slight adjustments, and others when you can’t use it at all. I want to do something about that.”

“Yes, that sounds bothersome.”

While the water wheel had a fairly stable power output compared to human strength, it was reliant on the water level of the river that rotated its wheels. On rainy days, it could get too much momentum and maybe even break, whereas on consecutive sunny days it was too weak and useless. Unlike human strength, it was not possible to adjust its output at will. It made me respect electricity’s outstanding reliability even more.

“It appears that we have to improve the water wheel after all. We need a more stable source of power.”

“Agreed. I want to work with more precision.”

“Especially if you want to build an airplane.”

Hearing me voice his ambitions, Hermes showed a proud smile.

Still, putting the airplane plan aside for now, it was too inconvenient to have the water wheel’s use be limited by the river’s water level fluctuations.

“If we could find a way to make a steam engine work, we would not have to deal with the water wheel’s issues...”

I was currently in the process of researching the steam engine, but so far, I

had only managed to produce a toylike model. At this rate, it would take at least one or two more years before it was possible to experiment with a prototype.

Even though I was the one who was planning all this, imagining that the same laboratory that was currently discussing the water wheel's inconveniences was going to test a steam engine in about two years' time almost felt like time travel. *I guess you could say that some of the knowledge has in fact slipped through time.*

While the pioneers who had developed the steam engine may have had the goal of producing a stable motive power in their eyes, they had still needed to start with the technical journey of how to get there. In contrast, I already knew which parts I needed and how to put them together (barring some possible measurement errors). An idea could only turn into a new invention as long as the right technology was available to the developer. Otherwise, it was useless. Be it the water wheel, the steam engine, or the aircraft, they were all products of a novel and correct assortment of existing technology at the time. As someone who knew what technology was necessary and how to properly assort it, I was enjoying quite the advantage. All that was left now was to develop the necessary technology to produce these inventions.

Since I did not need to come up with the idea of the steam engine, that left me with the need for metalworking technology capable of manufacturing a shell that could withstand the steam pressure and not let it escape. In order to fulfill that requirement, I needed to improve the furnace or kiln, as well as Hermes's new favorite toy: the lathe. Once both of these had reached a certain standard, we could immediately start making a steam engine prototype. After all, one of the lab members had already gotten ahead of himself and made a model.

I was already looking forward to it, but as a preliminary step, it was still necessary to improve the water wheel's output power. Besides, there was no harm in optimizing the water wheel's performance as much as possible, since fuel consumption was still going to pose a problem. At the very least, the water wheel was still going to be of use for the next few decades. I wondered how long it was going to take for the steam engine to be introduced to Noscula

village. Until then, we had no choice but to rely on the water wheel.

“Thank you for your opinion. I will see if I can find any literature on how to improve the water wheel.” *I’ll take this opportunity to look up windmills too.*

With water wheels alone, we were still confined to the riverbank. Sure, it is true that the manufacturing industry ordinarily relied on water, but it was good to have several options.

“So, I assume everyone is okay with continuing to improve the water wheel?”

There was one more thing that I needed to check. We had used the lathe not only to make cans for preserved food but also a bigger can for the dry distillation of wood. The idea was to retrieve the chemicals inside the wood and make charcoal. In this case, dry distillation involves a process of pyrolytic decomposition, and it’s usually called destructive distillation, which is achieved by heating the wood without igniting it.

Just like liquid evaporates when boiled, the components inside wood also turn into steam when heated. While charcoal is made from the charred remains after the vaporization, our research had focused on the steam this time. That was the purpose of the large can—a prototype of a dry distillation apparatus. It had produced a watery wood vinegar and thick wood tar. By carrying out fractional distillation and decomposing the wood vinegar even further, it was possible to obtain the right substance.

Lady Reina showed us a glass bottle containing the colorless and transparent liquid. “I made this according to your instructions and...”

“Thank you. Judging from the color, it looks like it worked, but that is a very small amount.”

“Yes, I’m surprised by how little it produced.”

No wonder she had such a puzzled look on her face. I was surprised myself. Since I had wanted to produce charcoal, I had asked them to dry distill ten kilograms worth of firewood, but there was just about a hundred milliliters or less inside the glass bottle.

“Mass-producing this seems impossible for the time being,” I concluded.

“I’m afraid so. At the very least, we need to increase the size of our equipment... Also, we should optimize it. Right now, our fuel cost is quite high.”

“How much did you spend?”

In response to my question, Lady Reina, who had been appointed head manager of the laboratory mainly to take care of the budget, slowly handed me the report. There was no need to read through it in detail—the number was one digit higher than what I had expected.

“We have to make sure to extract it on top of producing charcoal, otherwise mass production is not feasible at all. And we will have to review charcoal production from the ground up if we want to do this.”

We would have to ask all the charcoal makers to use our dry distilling equipment. And surely, they were not going to readily agree with changing their traditional methods. Especially considering the installation and maintenance fees.

“In the meantime, we will have to content ourselves with small quantities.”

I let out a sigh while replacing the small bottle’s lid with one that had a thick string passing through. One end of the string was soaked in the contents of the bottle and the other was hanging outside it. Everyone observed me closely as I took out a small branch from the embers of the stove and lit the side of the string coming out of the bottle. Naturally, the string caught on fire and kept burning without going out.

“That went well.”

The liquid inside the glass bottle was methanol extract—a kind of alcohol. This glass bottle was the prototype for a spirit lamp.

“What? How does this work?” After a while, Lady Maika bent forward to take a look at the flame that did not go out at all.

“It is the same as a candle. Just like a candle’s wick does not burn out as long as there is wax, this string keeps burning as long as there is alcohol inside the bottle.”

“Oh... Really? Why?”

“Apparently, because it is not actually the wick that is burning but rather the alcohol that it soaks up.”

This one lamp encapsulated so many interesting scientific phenomena. Fire truly was a symbol of wisdom.

“Hmm... And that’s it? If it’s the same, why not just use a candle?” Lady Maika asked.

“If you put it like that, I am not sure how to answer. Originally, I hoped it could be a substitute for candles.”

This world’s nights were long and there were not many ways to illuminate them. I had hoped this idea was going to help solve this problem. If there had been a way to efficiently obtain methanol, I would have liked to popularize these spirit lamps as another method of illumination alongside the candle.

“But it does not seem to be very cost-effective. Although, since it produces less soot and a more stable light than candles, maybe we could start by selling it as a luxury item to nobles and wealthy merchants... No, that probably would not work either.”

For a start, the only ones who worked so late that they needed candles were not wealthy people anyway, so there was not much of a demand. It might have sold with collectors of curious things, but my objective was the propagation of artificial illumination at night rather than sales.

“I guess my initial objective will not come to fruition for quite some time. I will try to discuss the matter with Mr. Quid and Lord Itsuki. There may be another use for it.”

The cans were a failure. And it did not seem like the spirit lamp was going to fulfill its intended purpose either. Even the lathe, which was the only project moving along well, still had a lot of room for improvement. In the end, this time’s progress was not very satisfactory.

“Oh dear...”

I had managed to reach a decent social standing, recruit partners who helped me, and increase our available resources, but my dreams were still not within reach. This world’s reality was truly harsh.

“I just cannot afford to stand still.”

How much further will I have to run until I can catch a break? Don't tell me I'll have to keep going at full speed until I die. But if that was what this world had intended for me, then I was prepared to run to the depths of Hell. I had made up my mind a long time ago. *And don't think I'm going to hold back from rummaging through Hell either.* I wondered who was going to regret the challenge in the end.

“All right, everyone! Let us keep moving forward at this pace! We are slowly but surely getting closer to the glory of the ancient civilization!”

At the very least, I was sure it was not going to be me. I was going to keep rolling on the road to my dreams with a smile on my face.

After checking up on the laboratory's progress, I had to contact all the different departments. First, I had to talk to Mr. Quid about the glass jars necessary for developing preserved foods. Next, I had to ask Mother Yae for help to research ways to improve the water wheel and the lathe's motive power. And finally, I needed to consult with Mr. Quid and Lord Itsuki about ways to make use of the spirit lamp.

Not being able to slow down, I wondered which one of these I should prioritize. I had to find the shortest way towards my goals. Which one was the best choice? After being lost in thought for a moment, I decided to leave the decision to the other members and run off on a different path.

In addition to my work at the promotion office, I also worked for the military. Thus, I simultaneously held the titles of head planner of the Territory Reform Promotion Office and adjutant to the regional knight Sir George. I was no longer an apprentice, but an official adjutant.

I headed towards the military office, located within the administrative halls. The room had been allocated to Sir George due to his prominence as a military figure.

“Welcome!”

As I opened the door, I was greeted by an odor much different from the one

filling the promotion office, which was primarily occupied by women. This was the foul stench of the men's world!

"Sir! Thank you for your hard work!"

"We were waiting for your arrival, Sir Ash!"

They took a bow as their rough voices resounded in unison. I felt like the leader of a crime syndicate that cut off people's fingers. As a novice, I also felt flattered by their welcome, so I urged them to sit down with a smile.

Looking around the room, I noticed that Sir George was missing. Moreover, someone had collapsed onto a table and was not moving at all. He did not look too bad, though, so I just checked with the others.

"Did anything happen while I was gone?"

The bald-headed Roland vigorously stood up. "No, Sir. There have been no emergencies. All our duties have been carried out without any problems. First, I would like you to take a look at our report on the packaged meals for expeditions."

"Understood. Thank you, Roland."

It was a clear and concise report befitting of a soldier. As I sat down, Roland handed me the soldiers' summaries. They had been working on a proposal to determine the basic amount of food necessary for troops that went outside the city to patrol and guard the territory. Until now, there had only been a rough estimate due to several reasons. However, looking at it from the point of view of the person in charge of the warehouse and finances, it was a huge waste of resources. In an attempt to prevent those losses, Sir George's company had gone on the offensive.

"I see you were able to calculate the average amount per person," I pointed out.

"Yes! The whole company went through strenuous efforts."

Apart from the person face-planting on the desk, everyone had a big, fierce smile on their face. It appeared that many soldiers had not been very cooperative in calculating the amount of food necessary for their meals.

After surveying the expressions of the middle-aged men, who happened to also be my subordinates, I nodded. “I will make sure your efforts will not go to waste. Leave the rest to me and Sir George. We will make sure that this proposal gets accepted.”

“Thank you!”

“Sir, we are counting on you!”

“Our adjutant will mow down anyone who gets in our way!”

I’m happy you trust me, but I’m not planning on killing anyone. Although accidents may still happen.

“By the way, is Glen all right? He still does not seem to get up.”

Roland grinned when I asked him about Glen, who had been assigned to Sir George’s company this spring and was currently lying headfirst on a desk. Roland’s smile resembled that of a demon, those that devoured children whole.

“He just overworked himself. But he’s got talent, so he’ll get used to it.”

“Yeah, yeah! Sergeant Roland made Glen write out the averages under constant supervision.”

“Not bad at all for a rookie. As you’d expect from a former classmate of our adjutant.”

The seniors showed slightly crooked smiles. It appeared that Glen had undergone his baptism as a fresh recruit.

Nonetheless, examining the writing on the report, I noticed that Glen’s section was shorter than those of the other troops. Therefore, taking Roland’s supervision into consideration, it was not so much bullying as a test of his practical skills. Sir George’s company just did not know how to hold back, since they were all demons from the Asura realm, who until recently had performed the insane task of reviewing the entire warehouse equipment once a year.

“Oh, I see. Given that this is not his favorite type of task, Glen did well.”

Glen himself was aware that, while he was a fearless fighter who had been the second-best in terms of fighting prowess in our year, he was not very good at performing intellectual labor or tasks requiring attention to detail. To

someone like him, quantifying the different types of meals consumed by hundreds of soldiers and writing out an average amount must have been a steep hill to climb. I greatly valued his efforts to challenge a task that he was not very good at.

“Ahhh... If you praise me, that must mean I’ve become a little smarter.” Seemingly revived by my words of praise, Glen raised his head. He had pronounced dark circles under his eyes.

“That is the result of your continued, honest effort from your days at the military academy. You kept at it more than others, for both your training and your studies.”

“Ha ha... You’re right. Two years ago, I probably wouldn’t have been able to complete this task.” Glen smiled while scratching his tanned forehead.

When we had first met, Glen was a devout believer in muscles over mind. From a young age, he had admired stories of heroes slaying hordes of demons, and he had a good physique himself. No matter what, he constantly thought about wielding a sword—or rather, I should say he wielded a sword before thinking. As such, he had also anticipated the military academy to be a place for training his body and not his mind.

He was not an exception. Among those that aspired to become soldiers, many were like him, and more than half of the boys that enrolled at the academy wanted to become soldiers. No wonder the classes at the academy had often been extended. Maika’s study group had also been a huge success.

On the other hand, the majority of girls joined the academy in the hopes of becoming maids. That also explained why there were so many women among the priests at the temple and the civil officials at the administrative halls.

Glen, who had renounced his faith in muscles over mind—or rather, had undergone a partial conversion—stood up and stretched his body while looking at me. “I’ve just been calculating as Sergeant Roland told me to, but what’s this actually for?” I was able to hear a crack as Glen inclined his head in bewilderment. His shoulders must have been very stiff.

“Ah, well, you are probably aware that it concerns the food for the soldiers that patrol outside the city. And as someone who has been on a camping trip, I

am sure you would agree that it is good to have a rough estimate of how much food you need to travel for a given amount of time.”

In fact, it took quite a long time for people who were not good at math to prepare their provisions.

“But wouldn’t it be good enough to just give them a rough estimate? Is there some other reason I don’t know about?” Glen asked.

“You only joined halfway through, so maybe I forgot to properly explain it to you.”

“Yeah, I don’t remember anything. Unless someone told me while I was calculating.” Glen scratched his head, not sure of himself.

I imagined it was hard for him to process new information while performing a difficult task. Just earlier, his mental circuits had broken as a result of doing too much arithmetic.

“Simply put, we have put together a proposal to prevent people from wasting our stockpiles by taking excessive amounts of food.”

“People take out that food in excess?” he frowned, doubting the honesty of my statement. He seemed to recoil at the mere thought of the stockpiled food’s bad taste. “Really? Someone’s taking out more than necessary of that dried meat that resembles withered branches? Of those biscuits that are as hard as iron? They’ve got some strange tastes...” Glen, who had experienced the bad taste of the stockpile reserves first-hand during our camping trip, murmured to himself as if he had discovered an incomprehensible life-form.

In response, Sir George’s troops and I waved our hands while smiling, and assured him that there was no such weirdo among us. “Rest assured, no one likes that food,” I said. “Those things were made with long-term preservation in mind, without taking into account taste at all.”

The biscuits especially had the potential to break your teeth if you ate them raw. They were so hard that people referred to them as “edible shields.” Some soldiers also joked that they had been saved by a biscuit blocking off a werewolf’s claws before. To be honest, those biscuits were actually so rock-solid that I was half-tempted to believe that story.

The dried meat was not much better. It was dried meat pickled in salt, so it was more salt than meat. If you ate it uncooked, it felt as if you turned into pickled meat yourself when taking a bite. The best way to eat it was to use it as a soup ingredient. That way you could enjoy salt-flavored soup. However, you could not expect to taste any meat flavor at all. It was more salt than meat after all.

Both of these preserved foods failed to meet the bare minimum necessary to qualify them as enjoyable meals. And unfortunately, they also represented the limits of long-term preserved food in this world. In fact, they were emergency rations to be consumed once the city had run out of food, in the event of a mass displacement of citizens due to bad harvests or demon attacks. Even among preserved foods, these were probably the ones that had received the lowest consideration in terms of taste. While they were certainly better than eating tree bark, they were not meant to be consumed as packaged meals. They were truly only meant for emergencies—to avoid dying from starvation.

Since these foods were manufactured mainly during the autumn harvest, the majority got spoiled inside the warehouse. And needless to mention, rotten food was thrown away. While they served the important purpose of minimizing harm in the worst-case scenario, they were also highly disposable items, which was a huge waste in a world plagued by hunger. As such, the domain's population had come to the following conclusion, "We'll get cursed if we throw away food. We should use it up before it spoils, starting with those that look worst! What a genius idea! Let's get to work!"

However, it seemed unlikely that anyone who wasn't starving was going to eat such awful-tasting food. Moreover, it did not seem like the best idea to feed food past its expiry date to those who were starving. Anyone who was already weakened from hunger may have just died from eating half-spoiled food. It definitely would not have been a good look if supplies from the count had delivered the coup de grâce.

From there, the conversation shifted to, "What about giving them to those strong soldiers? They need preserved meals for their patrols. These emergency rations count as preserved meals, right?" As a result, the soldiers had ended up paying the price. *Poor guys.* They did not want to take food that was akin to

poison on their already tough trips outside the city either. And their loyalty was not strong enough that they would have just eaten the unpalatable food without saying anything. Therefore, they thought to themselves, “How about we sell these so-called provisions and buy some actual food with the profits? We can easily get better dried meat, hard-baked bread, or other pickled food. What a genius idea! Let’s get to work!”

The only problem was where they were going to sell them. And who was going to buy them? Most people would have hesitated to receive them even for free. Still, there were people who did not have enough food, so the provisions were not impossible to sell. Besides, they were the soldiers who kept the peace of the domain. Surely, borrowing a little money was not going to be punished. If they sold the food for cheap, they probably could get a poor, starving person to buy it from them. However, if they were going to sell it for cheap, they needed to sell lots. And since there was no limit on how much they were allowed to take out, and no one knew what could happen outside the city, they decided to take more than necessary “as a precaution.”

“That pretty much explains the current situation of the troops’ packaged meals. To be frank, it is a hotbed of illegal acts: embezzlement, extortion, and collusion,” I concluded.

“No doubt that’s a bad thing, but I can’t bring myself to blame them too strongly,” Glen expressed his honest feelings.

Everyone in Sir George’s company agreed with him. It was easy to see how none of these illegal acts had turned into a problem until now.

“There is tacit approval from everyone. Shows you how bad that stockpiled food really is.”

No one who had tasted those provisions even once was going to denounce their illegal acts. Especially since they were accompanied by that stench of decay. It was no wonder that most soldiers had been so uncooperative in regard to the survey on their average meal quantities. If the provisions ended up getting limited, their sales would decrease, and in turn, they would no longer be able to buy decent packaged meals.

“Taking all that into account, this proposal suggests stopping the recycling of

old stockpiles as packaged meals for the troops.”

“How bold!” Surprised, Glen added, “As expected from you.”

“That’s a bigger incident than expected,” Roland said.

“Incident?” I asked.

I was working on projects and assignments, but I did not recall causing any incidents.

“Yeah, isn’t that a major incident? To break such a longstanding rule of the troops? Is it even possible?”

“I am not planning to break anything; I just want to mend some bad habits. Do not forget that the acting count Lord Itsuki is the person in charge of the military. I am sure he will understand.” Lord Itsuki was a ruler who cherished his troops. He knew very well how important it was to maintain their good morale. “Besides, while the whole issue is currently being overlooked, it is still undeniably a crime. And it is a huge problem that the soldiers who are supposed to enforce the law are criminals themselves.”

“I guess you’re right about that. I can already hear the people saying, ‘How dare they.’”

“Since the provisions are being sold to merchants, many citizens are already aware of the situation. And what is the difference between a corrupt soldier and a thief? Aside from the scale of their crime.”

This issue was counterproductive to the maintenance of the domain’s public order. The existence of criminals only gave birth to more criminals. And rising crime eventually led to more and more atrocious acts.

“Supply the soldiers with better packaged meals—that is all you need to do to solve this serious problem. In addition, we will restore a healthier marketplace by getting rid of all those merchants who were buying and circulating the half-rotten stockpiles.”

Having the count’s side causing such disarray was a recipe for disaster.

Glen had nodded along to most of what I was saying, but now he paused and tilted his head in confusion. “That all sounds good, but what about the money?”

The stockpiled rations are collected as taxes, so they are essentially free, right? If you buy the food from the market instead, that will cost money.”

“We examined that part in close detail in our proposal.”

After all, the practice of repurposing the provisions as packaged meals had originated from an attempt to make full use of the limited resources available. This may have sounded rude, but if this region had not been so stricken by poverty, these problems would not have occurred. That was not the case, though—the remote countryside of the region was almost by definition poor.

“It is true that it will be more expensive.”

“Won’t it be difficult to pass, then? I don’t know much myself, but I get the impression that proposals are less likely to get approval the more expensive it is to carry them out.”

That’s right. “However, that same money will also flow back into the domain’s economy. Although, to be precise, it will be food rather than money.”

“How so?”

“The merchants that relied on the stockpiles will have to start selling proper food.”

That was the benefit of replacing the stockpiles—which even someone as serious as Glen was hesitant to put in their mouth—with proper food. I was sure Lord Itsuki was going to understand.

“At any rate, tightening the troop’s discipline is my main objective. Those who are supposed to catch criminals cannot habitually commit crimes themselves. Any resulting costs from this plan can also be considered a profit if you look at the whole picture.”

For the rest, I just needed to downplay the drawbacks and explain the benefits as enticingly and thoroughly as possible. I was not going to lie. The listeners might just end up with a slightly biased view of the situation.

Of course, I was expecting pushback from soldiers bothered by having to change their habits. However, I was sure they would welcome not having to go through the effort of selling their rations. Especially once they realized that

their packaged meals were not going to drop in quality. Anyone who opposed the changes beyond that most likely abused the current practices to fill their own pockets. And someone like that was an enemy whom I was ready to purge with Lord Itsuki on my side. *Be prepared. We're coming for you.*

Several days later, Sir George approved the proposal for the packaged meals after looking through it. Not losing any time, I immediately booked an appointment with Lord Itsuki and got ready to argue in favor of our plan. As Sir George's attendant, I had been appointed with this task. *Isn't that supposed to be the highest-ranking officer's job?*

"And this sums up the proposal of the regional troops led by Sir George. Do you have any questions?"

"As always, your explanations are easy to understand," the acting count said.

Lord Itsuki smiled as if he were watching a comedy at the theater. He completely looked like an uncle having a good time with his niece, who sat next to him with a similar smile on her face. Yes, today Lady Maika was once again working in Lord Itsuki's office for her apprenticeship as a governing noble.

"You're great at this, Ash! You gloss over the disadvantages and elaborate on the profits only!"

"Maika, that almost makes it sound like fraud..."

I could not say with certainty that there were going to be profits, but I believed from the bottom of my heart that the projected results looked promising if we succeeded. As for the success rate? I was not sure which formula to use to determine that.

"I concur with Maika. I'm always impressed by your eloquent speech." After agreeing with his niece, Lord Itsuki cleared his throat and started speaking in a more serious tone. "Well, it does sound like a plan with nothing but advantages. Maika, I imagine you are also interested in this proposal as the head of the Territory Reform Promotion Office. What are your thoughts?"

It appeared that Lord Itsuki was going to use this proposal as an opportunity to teach Lady Maika. Seeing that Lord Itsuki had changed his attitude from that of an uncle to that of an acting count, Lady Maika also straightened up. Her

lively, cheerful personality, typical of a young girl, gave way to a more refined and serious look as she articulated her rational opinion. Her formal speech was a pleasure for the ears.

“Let me see. A lot has already been said about the merits for our troops, so I do not think there is much I can add to that. In regard to the entire territory, I think the increased circulation of food will be a net positive.”

Lord Itsuki fleetingly glanced in my direction after her reply. Apparently, he wanted to brag that his niece had given the perfect answer. *Yes, I got it. I’m also surprised by her growth. Please continue the test.*

“Why is that? The packaged meals have always been bought from the market. Wouldn’t there be less food in circulation given that the stockpiles will no longer be sold?” Lord Itsuki asked.

“That is improbable. In fact, you could say that the current method is decreasing the amount of food circulating in the market.”

“What do you mean?”

“The rations taste horrible. They are defective products in the marketplace. Imagine you had a wagon that could only carry ten items and three of those were already defective. That would mean you could only deliver seven proper meals, missing out on the profits from the three defective ones.”

Lord Itsuki gave an extremely strained smile at the mention of “defective products.”

Lady Maika continued, “Furthermore, those three defective meals will cast a shadow on the merchant’s earnings. For the clients that will mean they have to settle for poorer meals, but on a regional scale it may prevent the opportunity for dozens of potential merchants to start their businesses.”

“Hm. Do we need that many merchants?”

“Merchants fulfill the role of distributing goods across regions, making sure none are short on resources. Naturally, this also applies to food. If our territory ever faces a famine, merchants will be more likely to bring food from other places. In that case, the more numerous they are, the better.”

“I concur,” I said. “It would have the same effect as stocking up on food reserves.”

After reviewing his niece’s growth as a professional, Lord Itsuki once again reassessed the situation on his own. He carefully looked over the documents that I had handed him and asked Lady Maika another question.

“Should we get rid of our current stockpiles then?”

“Hmm...” It seemed like she was about to agree for a moment, but then she quickly shook her head. “No, we still need those. Even if a war with neighboring domains seems unlikely, we cannot ignore the possibility of demon attacks or poor harvests.”

“Yeah, I thought so too. In that case, we can’t reduce any costs.”

The emergency rations were provided for free anyways, so there were going to be costs no matter what—Lord Itsuki would have to give up on reducing expenses there.

In an attempt to uplift the disappointed Lord Itsuki, Lady Maika frowned as she carefully chose her next words. “However, we probably should re-examine the current stockpiling system. There are too many problems. We should slightly reduce the storage period and process the rations before they spoil.”

“That would be ideal, but once again, that will place a burden on us. Not just in terms of money, but also in personnel,” Lord Itsuki countered.

“Indeed. We will not be able to do it all at once. Remember that we are currently developing preserved foods at the Territory Reform Promotion Office. I will try to come up with a solution once I get back,” Lady Maika said.

Now that the acting count and his aide had come to an agreement, he nodded in my direction. “You heard it. I will give you an official answer after deliberating on some of the finer issues, but personally, I am in favor. First, I would like you to carry out some practice tests.”

As I made merry and assumed a victory pose on the inside, I took a deep bow. *Nothing beats having a reasonable supervisor.* “Understood. I will arrange a suitable expedition and prepare the test meals.”

Lord Itsuki's laughter echoed in the room. "Nothing beats having a subordinate who's quick on the uptake. Work just moves along smoothly, and we can start settling issues that were put on hold."

"I am honored by your words."

"Well, would you look at the time. Maika, this is all for today. How about you show some appreciation to your subordinate?" Lord Itsuki, who was in high spirits, handed his niece some money.

"Are you sure? Thanks, uncle!"

Lady Maika's smile resembled a blossoming flower as she looked at the weight in her hand. Lord Itsuki particularly liked that expression of hers—I could see why.

"Ash! Let me treat you to dinner tonight! As the chief, I will reward you for your daily hard work!"

With your supervisor's money! Of course, I did not say anything so tactless. The trick to being treated to anything is to make your benefactor feel good about giving you money.

"I am blessed to have such a wonderful superior. I look forward to working with you for many years to come!"

"Many years to—" It appeared that my words had struck a chord with Lady Maika, who turned bright red as blood rushed to her head. "Y-Y-You can count on me! If you like, I can always take care of your meals from here on out!"

That would be less like a wonderful superior and more like a woman providing for a financially dependent man.

I silently bowed my head towards her superior, Lord Itsuki. As a subordinate, I always looked forward to free meals.

With Lord Itsuki's remuneration in hand, Lady Maika and I visited Chef Yacoo's home, famously known as Cinnamon's Light throughout the Sacula region. I felt bad for the other restaurants, but nothing could beat the food here. Not to mention that the recipes that I had given to Chef Yacoo had been incorporated

into the menu, so it was possible to eat Hamburg steak and pizza. There was really no other option for Lady Maika, who loved Hamburg steak. We took up seats at a largish table and toasted with our wooden cups.

“You can eat as much as you want today, Ash!”

“I will gladly take you up on your offer.”

Since we were both quite familiar with each other, I readily agreed. Considering that Lady Maika had already ordered three plates of Hamburg steak, there was not much point in holding back. Like a naughty child, she energetically sunk her teeth into the Hamburg steak. I remembered how she had switched into work mode just earlier as I scooped up a piece of chicken from my stew.

“I was quite impressed by your conversation with Lord Itsuki earlier. You accurately perceived the possible impact of the proposal.”

“Really? Heh heh, you flatter me.”

It was worth praising her just to see her happy face alone. *This chicken’s great.*

Distracted by the delicious chicken in my mouth, I continued giving my impressions from today. “I was happy to see how much you have grown. It is a large issue, but you managed to pin down the gist and distill the essential problems. Your arguments were also very clear and persuasive.”

Lady Maika defended herself against my onslaught of praise with a bashful smile.

“It was also great how you decided to avoid certain subjects. Especially since you are not really involved in the military. It would have been difficult to find common ground in regard to the stockpile’s modifications. You did well to not go into those things.”

“Ah, yeah. I know it’s important, but I wasn’t sure I could make a convincing argument, so I just glossed over it.” Lady Maika nodded as she stuffed her cheeks with meat. “But it makes sense hearing your explanation. Since I don’t know much about the military, I can’t really say much either. It probably wouldn’t have been possible to reach a conclusion on the stockpiles.”

“Yes, that is spot on. It seems like you have great intuition.”

“Not at all! Discussions like that are really hard!”

Regular discussions were easy so long as you did not mind the arguments being all over the place. However, productive discussions required high communication skills and some shared knowledge from both parties.

Having more or less finished my review of Lady Maika’s speech and conduct from today, I now fully dedicated myself to my stew. All the stews at this restaurant were exquisite. You could see and taste the careful workmanship that went into the dish.

As I smiled from ear to ear, Lady Maika, who had already finished two Hamburg steaks, gazed at me as she stuck her fork into the third one. “Ash, you really are amazing!”

“Wha—What makes you say that?”

As I tilted my head while chewing the chicken, Lady Maika crammed the Hamburg steak into her mouth with a proud look about her. *Is she by any chance proud of this restaurant’s delicious Hamburg steaks?*

“Today’s proposal was great, and you’ve just got so many amazing talents. But what is even more amazing is the way you manage to motivate others. When you praise me, I feel like I can achieve so much more!”

“Is that so? I am pleased that you feel that way.”

I always carefully chose my words when praising people. In my experience, people were more likely to grow from praise than from scolding. As someone who wanted to gather as many talented people as possible, it was my philosophy to praise people whenever the opportunity presented itself. Thankfully, that was an easy task, since there was so much great talent around me. At first, I had started doing it because I had been impressed, but before I knew it, this had become my philosophy.

“Yes! At the very least, I like it when you praise me! So don’t hold back!”

“If my praise is any good to you, I will praise you as much as you want. You are becoming more self-reliant every day after all.”

She really was on a path of steady progress. I had been impressed by her thoughts regarding merchants and market circulation. The days when I had taught her how to read and write in the desolate church at the farm village seemed so distant in the past now. Lady Maika's fast growth was even more impressive if you considered that it had in fact only been five years since then. Having someone like her help me fulfill my dreams was like finding a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

"Maika, someone as talented as you is hard to come by. You are precious to me."

"Wha—!"

Lady Maika turned red as shivers ran down her spine. *She must really like receiving praise. How cute!*

Renge's Perspective

The administrative halls were surrounded by mansions of senior statesmen. Most civic officials and military officers working here either lodged in one of those mansions or owned one themselves—probably because they preferred living close to their workplace. Coming from the countryside, I counted myself among those people. I was lodging at Ms. Ran's mansion. She was Lord Itsuki's personal maid.

As I returned to my room, I saw my roommate—Ms. Azami—taking off her dark blue maid robe.

"Welcome back, Renge! You're early today."

"I-I'm home. Um, Lady Maika invited everyone at the promotion office to dinner tonight."

I unintentionally smiled while telling my senior about my plans. As an introvert, I usually didn't get invited, so it made me happy. Not to mention that we were going to a restaurant famous for its delicious food! I wasn't able to suppress my enthusiasm.

"Nice! Where are you going?"

“To C-Cinnamon’s Light.”

“Wow! They managed to book a table there? Wait. Since you only told me now, does that mean it was only decided today? Isn’t it amazing they got a same-day reservation?”

“Y-Yeah, it is.”

Ash and Lady Maika were on good terms with Chef Yacoo, so they were able to reserve a table fairly easily. Previously, when I had told Ash how difficult it was to get a table there, he had stared at me in puzzlement. Apparently, he had never been turned down when making a same-day reservation.

“Ash’s something else... He’s treated as a guest of honor.”

“Y-Yeah, i-it’s amazing...”

When it came to that restaurant, Ash’s name carried the same authority as the count’s family name.

I took off my cape and opened the closet. Since the dinner wasn’t work-related, I was going to change into a slightly brighter cape.

“Wait, Renge. You’re not seriously planning on going there in your maid outfit, are you?”

“Y-Yes? Um... It’s not dirty a-and it won’t breach etiquette, right?”

“Don’t worry about etiquette! That’s not what I mean. Ash always sees you in that outfit, so how about you show him how cute you can look?”

“B-But just changing clothes won’t...”

“Come on, you’re a hidden gem. If you put on some brighter clothes, your impression will...” Ms. Azami looked up at the ceiling after peeking into my closet. “And of course you only have dark clothes... What were you thinking, Renge?”

“B-Bright clothes don’t suit me at all...”

“But you’re still a young maiden at heart! Guess I’ve got no choice...” Ms. Azami jumped out into the corridor and shouted in a loud voice, “Everyone! All the maids who are free right now, gather around Princess Renge!” At once,

noise could be heard from the corridor. “I’m looking for cute clothes that fit Renge! She’s going out to drink with Ash tonight!”

And suddenly...

“What? Really?”

“Oh, okay. Yeah, she needs to put in some effort.”

“Where are they going? Cinnamon? I want to go too!”

“For Renge? I’ve got some clothes that I want her to try on.”

“It may be a bit difficult. Some of Renge’s sizes are...”

“You don’t have to say anything more!”

Before I realized what was happening, it had turned into a major incident. While I had been busy getting flustered, my seniors had already brought their clothes and started commenting as they held them up against my body.

“Doesn’t this one expose too much skin for someone like Renge?”

“It’s not a one-on-one date after all. We should go for a neat and simple dress.”

“What a shame, it looked so good...”

“I’m jealous of her childlike face. It creates such a good contrast with her figure.”

“Maybe something white with some lighter-color highlights?”

“Yeah, primary colors probably won’t make her stand out enough.”

“It’s settled then! This will be Renge’s date outfit for tonight!”

It was a white, long-sleeved dress, with the collar, sleeves, and hemline dyed in light purple. The design was simple. It looked similar to my usual maid outfit, but the fabric was a little thinner—it accentuated the shape of my body. Moreover, its dazzling color was the exact opposite of the maid dress.

“Good work, everyone!”

“Well done!”

“The simple design lets you appreciate the raw material.”

“Renge, you can keep it. It looks ten times better on you.”

“You’re a great senior—I’ll treat you tonight.”

“Now you’re ready to go, Renge! Enjoy yourself!”

Wh-What? U-Um, I-I’m struggling to keep up with the conversation... Am I really supposed to go like this? I feel more comfortable in my usual clothes. Th- This feels a bit embarrassing...

“What is this ruckus?” Ms. Ran, the mansion’s owner, had entered the room.

At once, the noise stopped and everyone straightened up their backs.

“U-Um... They all helped me choose my outfit for tonight...”

Though still confused, I stepped forward to prevent my seniors—who had helped me a lot—from getting scolded, but Ms. Ran raised her hand to stop me.

“You don’t need to say anything. I know what’s going on.”

Ms. Ran walked behind my back while she talked in the same unemotional voice she used when reprimanding Lord Itsuki. I tried looking over my shoulder, but she ordered me to stand still. *Wh-What’s happening?* We shouldn’t have been so noisy, but her anger seemed out of proportion.

While I was feeling nervous, something gently touched my hair and the nape of my neck. In front of me, I could see some of my seniors smiling. A soothing metallic sound rang from my chest area. Looking down, I saw a silver chain with an amethyst swaying back and forth.

“Wear this necklace tonight.”

That short sentence from Ms. Ran sent shivers down my spine. I realized what she had put around my neck and why she had done it. *I-I’m humbled!*

“I-I can’t use something so expensive just to dress up...!”

“You need to pay more attention to your appearance. As a maid in charge of entertaining guests, you should constantly work on your charm. That’s a basic rule for us maids. I have to make sure that everyone lodging at my house is aware of that.”

Ms. Ran put her hands on my shoulders. With a gentle, encouraging push, she

made me puff out my chest. This posture lifted up my jaw and, in turn, my face.

I heard Ms. Azami let out a shriek of joy. “As expected from Ms. Ran! She’s the ideal head of the maids!”

“Wow, it perfectly matches the outfit’s color! It’s as if the amethyst were tailor-made!”

“It highlights Renge’s biggest selling point—her chest.”

“You’re right. It attracts one’s gaze. Renge, you’re the strongest you’ve ever been!”

“N-Not at all... You say that, b-but...” I tried to argue.

“It’s just a casual dinner with your work colleagues—there’s nothing to worry about. For someone like you, who’s not used to social interaction, it’s a good opportunity to gain some experience.”

Ms. Azami vigorously nodded along to Ms. Ran’s words.

I felt exhausted before I even set foot in the restaurant. Once I walked in, Ash quickly showed me to my seat. *He’s so gentle.*

Today’s celebration included Reina and Hermes, the heads of the Territory Reform Promotion Office’s laboratory; Glen, who served as a soldier under Sir George; and, of course, Lady Maika and Ash. Thinking about it, excluding me, they were all former classmates from the military academy. It made me realize that the academy was in fact a place to form personal relationships like these. Compared to them, I just hadn’t been able to make any connections at all during my time at the academy.

As expected from graduates of the greatest class in the history of the academy, everyone was engaging in sophisticated conversations. While Hermes and Ash were passionately discussing the laboratory’s future direction, Lady Maika and Glen were talking together about sword fighting with a sharp look in their eyes. As for me, I was talking with Reina about our work relationship. I imagined she was just being nice to me.

“Renge, you really saved me by arranging that cash so quickly!”

“N-Not at all. That’s just part of my job. I-I’m used to that much.”

“But didn’t you do it while working on the report with Ash? I’m sorry for giving you more work, even though you were already so busy. I’ll make sure that won’t happen again.”

“N-No, really, that’s okay!”

“It’s not okay! In the first place, that was only necessary because one of our members secretly carried out unplanned experiments. He was even so impudent as to take money from a different experiment’s funds! That led to a huge deficit, because I didn’t have the right numbers to calculate the budget! And as a result, we have to do more work. I can’t let him get away with that.”

Reina gulped down her ale and slammed the mug on the table. Hermes interrupted his conversation with Ash to pour her another drink.

“If only he had told me, I could have avoided that calculation error... Or rather, if he had stuck to the plan, there wouldn’t have been any budget deficit. Anyway, you shouldn’t be so lenient, Renge! You know how much trouble it was to come up with that plan, right? Our lab’s full of idiots!”

Should I just agree with her? I took a fleeting glimpse at Hermes—probably the instigator of this whole incident. His look almost urged me to nod along.

“Y-Yeah, you’re right.”

“Right?! I knew you’d understand!”

As I hesitatingly agreed, Reina firmly grasped my hands, and Hermes swiftly came over to my side to pour me another drink. *Wh-What was that reaction? No one has treated me this nice besides my family and my childhood friend...*

While I sat in bewilderment, Hermes had poured ale into my mug. Maybe a little too much, in fact.

Then, he quietly apologized. “Please excuse her. Our laboratory is full of men, so she has built up some pent-up stress. Of course, it’s also my fault for making a blunder. Yeah, I’m really sorry about that.”

Ah, I see. Reina was a very level-headed person, but even so, it must have taken a lot of effort to be in an all-male environment. I probably wouldn’t have

lasted a day there...



As I finally understood the situation, Ash joined the conversation to vehemently agree with Reina. “She is right, Hermes! If you are going to do something like that, you have to make sure no one finds out. You should have asked me for advice. So, when is your next secret plan?”

“Ash! No wonder Hermes gets carried away with a supervisor like you!” Reina yelled out of exasperation in response to Ash’s hopeless schemes.

Ash stayed composed, but Hermes started panicking. I couldn’t help but let out a laugh. Even though they all gave special treatment to Ash, they were still good friends. Having the opportunity to engage in such a lively conversation was really amazing for someone like me.

As things finally calmed down, I overheard Lady Maika and Glen’s conversation.

“Nice. So the military’s packaged lunches have been successfully freed from the shackles of the stockpiled rations,” Glen said.

It appeared that they were talking about the proposal to revise the military’s packaged meals.

Probably hearing their conversation, Reina asked Ash what they were referring to. She looked like a student in the middle of class when asking.

“I see. So that’s why we were developing preserved foods at the laboratory,” she said.

“Yes, precisely. I had hoped that the timing would be right.”

This once again showed how amazing Ash truly was. He had planned to combine the replacement of the military’s packaged meals with the promotion office’s development of canned foods and press forward both issues at once. Unfortunately, he was deeply disappointed that the canned foods had been a failure.

Meanwhile, Hermes only understood what Ash was talking about after Reina explained it to him.

“So, in other words, Ash conspired to force through two troublesome projects at once. How shrewd,” he remarked.

“That almost makes it sound like an evil scheme,” Reina protested.

“Isn’t it?”

I-It didn’t sound like an e-evil scheme to me. He was just laying the groundwork to move his plans forward at a decent pace.

Ash also objected to that characterization, but Hermes and Reina didn’t pay any attention to it as they laughed at each other.

As I watched them enjoying themselves, Reina leaned in to let me in on the fun. “Why do you think Ash managed to object so smoothly?”

“Because he is such an eloquent speaker?”

“That’s half correct,” she continued whispering. “Since he also thinks of it as an evil scheme, he’s got the counterargument all figured out.”

That made sense. I felt a bit bad admitting it, but it sounded convincing to me... *No, it can’t be.* Ash wouldn’t have come up with an evil scheme. It must have been purely to advance things as smoothly as possible. It must have been that... right? A-After all, he was saying how we should support Ajole and Sekuba village, who suffered from recurring bad harvests. I couldn’t forget his expression when he had said that he wished he had a bottomless pocket filled with unlimited food.

As I was lost in thought, I suddenly came to a realization. Food. Pocket. Packaged meals. Ajole village. Support. Everything seamlessly clicked together in my mind. I wondered if it was possible. It was a simple idea by an underling maid who didn’t have the slightest idea of the region’s governing processes. How could I meddle with government affairs if I couldn’t even get along with my childhood friend?

A distant voice echoed in my head: *it’s easier to just give up.* If I held my tongue and cast my eyes downward, no one was even going to notice that I had thought something stupid. And yet... Before I could give up, I timidly raised my head and looked at Ash. It was quite strange how Ash almost always smiled back at me when I looked at him in the hopes of getting noticed.

“Um... Regarding the stockpiles...”

My suggestions weren't really worth much, but if only Ash agreed... I had to try. I got ready to entrust Ash with the cold, heavy burden lying in the depths of my mind.

"There are some leftovers that the military won't use, right?" I asked.

"I am not sure if you can call them leftovers, but... Well, whatever is not consumed is kept for emergencies."

"A-As I thought. I know that's the correct use, since they are emergency rations, but..."

My voice trembled as the others started looking at me too. *Wh-What should I do?* I should have just consulted Ash later. Or rather, brought it up as part of some small talk... But there was no way that I could have naturally pulled off a conversation like that.

"C-Couldn't we repurpose it as aid for the areas suffering from bad harvests?"

"Hm? I mean..."

Ash showed a negative reaction. As expected, the idea of someone like me was no good. I shouldn't have said anything. Yet at the same time, I thought about pushing it a little further. Ash seemed to be taking my suggestion seriously.

"I realize that a lot of the rations are spoiled and dangerous to consume, but there should also be some that are fine, right?"

"Yes, of course. Otherwise, we would not be able to use them for the military either. I see."

The warmth carried by Ash's words had changed. He had started to refine my proposal in the flames of his mind to see whether it was possible and appropriate.

"Considering that we will stop using those rations, we could work out a way to redirect them to the areas affected by bad harvests. Sorting out all the items from the stockpiles can be a bit nerve-wracking, but that also applies to choosing the packaged meals for military expeditions. The only reason why it has not been done until now is because of the proposals from former higher-

ups, so it is not like there is any written law against it. Since the stockpiles are reserved for the city, we need to fulfill certain requirements to take them outside. However, if we gather enough people to sort through the stockpiles and establish a protocol for food selection as well as preparation, we can minimize the risks of food poisoning, which our predecessors sought to avoid.” And finally, the furnace of his mind produced the following sentence: “Maybe our pockets are bigger than I thought.” They may not have been magical, but they weren’t so bad after all.

Y-Yay! Now that Ash had approved of my idea, it seemed highly feasible.

After a pause, he added, “Or rather, you managed to expand our pocket, Renge. Let me express my gratitude.”

“N-Not at all! It’s only because of your and Sir George’s troops’ proposal.”

I’d just thought that maybe I could do something for the village where my childhood friend lived when I’d heard about that plan.

Although I quickly shook my head, Ash only seemed to be half-listening. He went on to equally distribute credit. “Then let us say it is everyone’s achievement. Great! We keep improving and accomplishing more wonderful things.”

As I looked towards Glen, a member of Sir George’s troops, he waved his hands as if to say “I don’t think I’ve really done anything.”

Still, Ash continued to fire up his thinking process. “Come to think of it, we need to prepare an expedition to test the practical use of the new packaged meals... How about we test the military’s new meals while transporting the stockpiled supplies to the areas suffering from a bad harvest?”

I was not sure how to answer that. Although of course I realized that he wasn’t really talking to me.

“I could be killing two birds with one stone! And we would be able to observe the agricultural practices of the areas affected by crop failure! This might even be a shot at three birds! We definitely have to do this!”

“His switch has been activated.”

Lady Maika's murmur was all that needed to be said. It felt as if someone had pulled the trigger on a ballista—there was no coming back from this much conviction.

"The Territory Reform Promotion Office will be in charge of writing up a proposal for the use of stockpiled rations as recovery support. Can you please take care of that, Renge?"

And apparently, I was also in the line of fire of the ballista. Although that was to be expected—I was the idea's proposer.

"Glen! Sir George's troops will be in charge of the expedition plan. The purpose is the maintenance of public order within the territory. Particularly, to ease the concerns regarding the areas affected by bad harvests. Please start planning among the troops!"

"O-Okay... What area are we talking about?"

"I will let you know tomorrow, once I get to the promotion office."

I also overheard Reina and Hermes telling each other to prepare themselves just in case.

"Ha ha ha, it looks like this summer will get quite hot again."

The image of Ash cheerfully bursting into laughter right next to Lady Maika, who seemed to equally enjoy herself, burnt itself into my memory.

Several days later, and thanks to the support of the civil branch—represented by the Territory Reform Promotion Office—and the military branch—represented by Sir George's troops—the expedition was approved. The main objectives of the expedition were to test the new packaged meals, maintain public order, analyze the agricultural techniques of the areas affected by disasters and crop failure, and distribute food to them. The project was called "Expedition for Testing Packaged Meals, Maintaining Public Order, Analyzing Agricultural Techniques, and Distributing Food." *Yes, that's right.* Just by the title, you could not discern the main objective. *If I dare say so myself, it's quite impressive that I managed to get this approved.*

There was no doubt the proposal would have never passed if I had just submitted the whole thing upfront. How did I get its approval, then? Rest

assured—I did not use any unscrupulous methods that would have violated the public order, such as bribing the lord. I had simply made sure to present the information in the right order.

More specifically, it had started with Sir George’s troops submitting a request for an expedition to test the new packaged meals. Once their request had been approved, the Territory Reform Promotion Office had jumped in to suggest using that expedition as an opportunity to inspect the areas affected by disasters and crop failure. Finally, once that proposal had passed, we had brought up the idea of distributing the leftover stockpiles from the warehouse to the people in need.

This procedure took advantage of human psychology, since it is harder for someone to reject additional requests once the initial proposal is approved. As a result, the first and the final drafts of the project were as different as heaven and earth, but I had somehow managed to get my way just through momentum alone.

Half of the expedition party consisted of soldiers from Sir George’s company, and the other half of soldiers from troops that had already been in charge of patrolling those areas. Since Sir George’s troops did not usually leave the city, they needed a guide. Besides, it was an opportunity to hear the other experienced soldiers’ opinions on the new packaged meals.

Lady Maika was also accompanying us as a representative of the promotion office—partly because she was the supervisor, but also because her agricultural knowledge and farming experience were invaluable when inspecting the affected areas’ agricultural practices. She was the only person in the office capable of analyzing the fields the same way I could. The person who rejoiced the most at Lady Maika’s decision to come along was without a doubt Glen. Every morning and evening without fail, you could see Glen rushing towards Lady Maika with a smile on his face during their training on the campground.

“Maika, are you up for a duel once we’ve finished warming up?”

“Sure! Best of three?”

They were both worthy rivals to each other. Looking at them, I noticed how Glen’s romantic feelings for Lady Maika had seemingly dwindled. It was not as if

they had completely disappeared, but now their relationship appeared to be purely platonic. Maybe something I did not know of had happened between the two.

Graduating from the military academy was a turning point in the lives of children from respectable families. Many girls chose to get engaged or get married to their fiancés once they graduated. While Glen's romantic feelings may have been unrequited, they had blossomed into a genuine friendship. I felt a bit bad for him, but seeing what a cheerful and good-natured person Glen was, I was sure that he was going to find the right person sooner rather than later.

In a situation like this, you were supposed to pray to the monkey god in this world. He was not only the god of wisdom but also the god of harmony. Meanwhile, the wolf god was the way to go if you wanted to pray for your precious children. Although, if what you wanted was to protect your family, then the dragon god—the god of war—may have also been a good choice. In short, you could not go wrong as long as you prayed to one of the great gods. Personally, I chose to pray to the familiar Goddess Yuika, who represented all lovey-dovey married couples. And my prayers tended to work quite well. You just had to look at how much Mother Yae had managed to corner Sir George. At this point, it was only a matter of time before they would get married.

Our expedition moved forward smoothly as scheduled. We had arrived at Adele village, our third destination. It was Lady Renge's hometown, a village that had suffered from damage by wild animals last year. Compared to the previous two locations we had visited—a village struck by water damage and one suffering from crop failure—the place was rather lively. On paper, they were still recovering from the damages, but everyone was so cheerful that it seemed like everything was back to business as usual.

“Welcome, everyone! As the representative of Adele, it is my pleasure to welcome you to our humble village!”

Our expedition party was greeted by a kind-looking village chief. Lady Maika, who held the highest status among the party members, stepped forward and put on a bright and elegant smile before switching to work mode.

“Thank you for your warm welcome. We are sorry to disturb you during such a busy time. My name is Maika Amanobe. I am the head of the Territory Reform Promotion Office.”

After hearing her name, the village chief gave a genuine, kind smile. “We have heard rumors about you for quite a while now. It is all thanks to your Territory Reform Promotion Office’s proposal that we are able to prosper like this again. I would like to express our deepest gratitude for the tax exemption in light of our financial recovery.”

“It is all the fruit of your labor. His Excellency the count is aware of Adele’s large contributions towards the territory over the years.”

“Thank you once again. We are humbled by your kind words.”

Lady Maika then followed the village chief to his house to discuss the details of our visit. Apart from Glen, who accompanied her as an attendant, everyone else was led to the expedition party’s accommodations. The people from Adele village must have been extremely happy about the tax exemption considering how kindly they treated us. They had cleaned and prepared vacant houses as our lodgings. What a relief! Otherwise, we would have had to either set up camp at the outskirts of the village or propose to stay overnight with families that had space in their houses.

However, the vacant houses were not all good news. They were proof that, even though it appeared like nothing had happened, some people must have lost their lives to the wild animal attack. Vacant houses in farming villages were traces of the people who had left this world.

I put down my luggage in one of the houses and immediately headed out to inspect the fields. At first glance, I noticed that the fields were well maintained. Although there were some differences between the plots, there seemed to be a unified approach to agriculture.

“These are great fields. They are attempting to save labor by dividing up the work and prioritizing what is now possible in their current situation. They aimed for the best possible outcome rather than perfection.”

Leaving so many idle plots must have been a deliberate choice to focus the diminished manpower. It appeared they were also limiting themselves to only

growing the main crops. As a result, they could manage everything thoroughly.

“Ash, you’re early as always.”

As I was inspecting the fields, Lady Maika had returned from the village chief’s house. Seeing how she was now speaking more casually, it appeared like the work-related discussion was over.

“These are some nice fields! Um... I mean, what is your opinion, Ash?”

“They are enlightening. They devised a way to save labor while also keeping up their harvest yield. It is a great reference if we ever have to deal with the consequences of a disaster.”

Inspecting actual locations was often informative because you sometimes stumbled upon approaches like these, which originated from experience rather than instruction manuals.

“You know what you are talking about. Are you familiar with farming practices?” asked the village chief, who had just arrived behind Lady Maika.

However, before I could say anything, Lady Maika proudly answered in my place. “Yes, he is. Ash is the head of planning at the Territory Reform Promotion Office. He is like a great sage who knows everything from agriculture to manufacturing work!”

Since she had raised the bar quite a bit, I tried walking under it. “That is a bit of an overstatement. I am just used to the fieldwork because I am the son of a farmer.”

“Oh, so you are Ash!” The village chief suddenly drew closer and grasped both my hands with a big smile on his face. “Chief Maika told me that it was your idea to request a tax exemption. Thanks to your support we were able to return back to normal with minimal casualties, as you can see. And she also mentioned that this patrol was your idea too!”

“Well, I only came up with the idea for an expedition after listening to everyone else’s opinions, so the others deserve credit too.”

He seemed to hold me in very high esteem. That went to show how effective the promotion office’s measures had been. I thought about thanking Lord

Arthur as well, who had had to leave the city due to family affairs. I was sure she was going to rejoice.

After praising me so highly for a while, the village chief's smiling face was suddenly overcome with embarrassment. "Besides, I've heard that you are looking after my daughter. Please let me express my gratitude as a father."

"Oh, you mean Renge?"

"Yes. I'm sorry, I forgot to introduce myself. My name is Marco. I am Renge's father and Adele's village chief."

As I had thought. Their eyes looked the same and they had a similar vibe. Moreover, normally only the sons and daughters of nobles and village chiefs were allowed to study at the military academy. I could vouch for that as the exception to the rule.

"It is I who should be expressing my gratitude. I am very much obliged to Renge."

"You are exaggerating. Is she of any help at work?" Renge's father seemed extremely curious about his daughter, who lived far apart.

"Of course! She is truly outstanding and always helps us out. I can entrust her with any work, since she is so serious and tenacious. Renge also played an active role in putting together this inspection and distribution project," I openly gave my opinion.

Renge was such a laborious type; you could count on her to silently get the job done if you provided her with the reference data and methodology. She diligently took care of the tasks that I considered to be a bother, so I was quite happy and relieved to have her on my team.

As I gave my review of Renge to Chief Marco, he smiled while nodding along. "My daughter was picked up by a wonderful department. I cannot thank you enough."

"The feeling is mutual. I am thankful that someone as brilliant as Renge chose to join us."

"Not at all. I am sure it is you and Chief Maika who are contributing to my

daughter's success." A good worker like her would have been in demand no matter the department, but Chief Marco seemed to disagree as a slightly concerned look came over his face. "My daughter is a little shy... She wasn't able to make many friends at the military academy, and in class she didn't raise her hand much either. As a result, her evaluation wasn't great."

"Well, she's indeed the quieter type," Lady Maika agreed with Chief Marco.

"Since work isn't something that you can just do by yourself, I feared that she may end up not getting appreciated at all."

"That would have been a waste indeed. She is one of our main subordinates, and she is also in Lord Itsuki's good books."

"I am immensely pleased to hear that as her father."

I see. So that was why he acted so friendly towards us—he was a doting father. While he had mentioned that his daughter was not valued by the people around her, he had never once said that she was not talented. No wonder why Renge had turned into such a serious and honest person, being raised with so much love.

"By the way, Ash. When I spoke earlier with the village chief," Lady Maika switched back into work mode and started giving her report, "he asked if it was possible to redirect the stockpiles reserved for Adele to Ajole village."

"Hm. Well, I do not mind, but..."

I took a look at Chief Marco's expression. He must have been refraining because he was aware of the stockpiles' reputation, probably after experiencing their taste himself at a camping trip during his time at the academy.

"The food stockpiles we brought are of good quality. I believe they would come in handy," I said.

"I appreciate the gesture. It is true that it would be helpful to have some more food, but... For the time being, we have recovered. However, Ajole village seems to be in a much harsher situation, so I would like you to help them instead if possible."

Ajole was the last stop of our expedition—a village that had suffered from

crop failures for the past twenty years. While Adele was indeed doing poorly compared to its heyday, Ajole had pretty much reached its limits. If asked which one of them needed help more urgently, I would have had to say the latter.

“What is your opinion, Chief Maika?”

“If Adele village agrees, then I see no problem with it. There is no point in forcing the stockpiles on them.”

“You are right.”

While I openly agreed with Lady Maika on the surface, I disagreed on the inside. Looking at it from a risk-return perspective, we should have invested in Adele village. However, the stockpiles were not something we should have imposed on them either.

“I understand your wishes, but... It is a difficult decision to give away everything to Ajole. Is there a particular reason?”

“If the neighboring village falls into ruins, we will also end up suffering the consequences. But that’s not everything...” For instance, some villagers from Ajole may have become thieves out of desperation. But there seemed to be more to his concerns. “Actually, Ajole is a village that branched off from Adele, so you could say we are extended family.”

“Ah, I see. It is located fairly nearby too.”

It was just like Lord Arthur had said a while back. In that case, there must have also been many of their blood relatives among Ajole’s villagers.

“We have been on bad terms for twenty years, but even so, we are strongly tied to each other. I cannot rest easy knowing that they are in distress.”

“I understand.”

Therefore, we could not just force the food on Adele village just purely out of convenience. That would also negatively impact their recently gained favorability towards us. It was a bit unfortunate, but I decided to accept the request, as I did not see any point in strongly objecting.

“I support Chief Maika’s decision. We will take the remaining stockpiled food and distribute all of it to Ajole village.”

In return, I was going to thoroughly inspect Ajole to find out the underlying problems with their fields. I did not want to let our food investment go to waste.

During the rest of our stay in Adele, Chief Marco explained the measures they had implemented, such as the field's management methods and the distribution of the surplus food that they had retained because of the tax exemption.

Lady Maika and I both came to the conclusion "like father like daughter" in regard to Chief Marco and Lady Renge. While the chief's methods were quite simple, they produced steady results. It made sense that Lady Renge had turned into such a hard worker with a father like that. Even after all of the village's efforts had been wasted due to the wild animal attack, Chief Marco did not become disgruntled, nor did he undertake any risky ventures. Instead, he talked things through with the villagers and focused their resources on the weak points to support the whole structure.

This may have seemed an obvious response, but it was no easy feat to muster up the emotional strength necessary to carry it all out in a weakened state. Not everyone readily approved of plain work like this, so there must have been some backlash at first. Humans preferred to work shorter hours and tended to be drawn to the flashiest methods.

After hearing his extremely useful explanation, I decided to document Adele as a successful example of how to properly respond to a disaster. If we stored that information in the administrative hall's records and the temple's library, it may someday help someone else in a crisis. Maybe we could even set up a section dedicated to measures for emergency situations, like a first-aid kit of knowledge that you could seek out in times of need. Hopefully, the accumulated knowledge was going to be a powerful weapon against all future enemies.

One day after leaving Adele, we arrived in Ajole. No one spoke a word. Considering that we had arrived at the final destination of our expedition, you would have expected some chatter about how tired we were or someone saying they were looking forward to a break, but instead, everyone held their

tongue and fell silent. The gloomy atmosphere surrounding the village made everyone's words get stuck in their throats.

"This is worse than expected."

Trying to ignore that mood, I raised my voice as usual. Upholding the team's morale was just as important as taking responsibility for a commanding officer.

As I carried out my task as adjutant of Sir George, Lady Maika also performed her duty as the department chief. "You are right. I guess it was the right call to bring the food from Adele village."

"Looks like it. That was a lucky call."

The ruined fields caught my attention. While Adele village had carried out the necessary maintenance, many plots were just neglected here in Ajole village. Half of the fields were just growing wild. No wonder why their yield had dramatically decreased with such little cultivated land.

Most crops in this world were of excellent quality, possibly due to selective breeding back in the times of the ancient civilization. Nevertheless, they could only live up to their full potential if planted in properly maintained fields. Judging from these fields, this village's soil had already reached its limits.

"Let us hurry. It looks like they will need the food as soon as possible."

Fearfully, I took a look inside the village. Considering that I had withheld support for this place, it would not have surprised me if someone had grown horns and were about to pounce at us at any moment.

To my surprise, however, we were greeted by a little girl right after entering the village. Due to how thin she was, she looked quite young, but she must have been the same age as us. Her sitting posture was all that remained of her good upbringing, which made me guess she must have been related to the village chief. Excluding that, her plain dress and disheveled appearance were those of a poor villager.

"Are you...the people who sent a message...about coming to check on us? Is that you?"

Before I was able to respond to her question, Lady Maika made eye contact

with me to confirm that this girl was undoubtedly representing the village chief. Then, she put on a smile and stepped forward.

“Yes. My name is Maika Amanobe. I am in charge of the expedition party patrolling the area, inspecting, and distributing food. Listening to the requests of each village is part of our mission, so if there is anything you need, please let me know.”

“Ah, that’s good to hear...” The girl let out a sigh of relief and gave us a worn-out smile. “So it’s the expedition party patrolling, inspecting, and...?”

Just when I had thought that she was smiling, an uneasy expression came over her face again. The expedition had quite a long title to remember it right away. Lady Maika seemed to realize this as well, and tried to soothe the girl by adopting a friendlier smile.

“It’s a long title. You can just call it ‘expedition party.’”

“I-I’m sorry... I’m not used to this kind of thing at all...”

“Don’t worry, everyone here agrees that we need an abbreviation for this long title. We even discussed it on the move, but never reached an agreement.”

She was telling the truth—some laughs coming from the expedition party, slightly lifting the heavy mood, were proof of it.

“O-Okay. Um, let me take you to my father then.”

In response to Lady Maika’s consideration, the young girl caught her breath and gave us a clumsy smile as she turned her back to lead the way. However, she immediately turned back again.

“I’m sorry. I forgot to introduce myself. I’m Sui—I mean, I am the daughter of Village Chief Louis. My name is Suiren.”

“Nice to meet you, Suiren.”

“L-Likewise. Chief Louis is not feeling very well, so I’m taking care of most things here. Since I lack experience, I am afraid I may behave disrespectfully, but...”

“Don’t mind us, we are the ones intruding after all. You can take it easy,” Lady Maika reassured her.

It appeared—or rather, as her childhood friend I was sure—that Lady Maika did not mind Lady Suiren’s blunders. It would have been different if she had shown disdain for the expedition party, but Lady Maika was not so petty as to get offended at someone’s nervous blunders.

Nonetheless, from Lady Suiren’s point of view, Lady Maika was the commander of a joint military and civil expedition party that had been entrusted with a complicated mission. Contrary to her young appearance, Lady Maika gave off the impression of—and was in fact—an important figure. It was only natural that Lady Suiren’s skinny body froze stiff in fear at their first meeting.

“N-No, I need to stick to...” the girl began.

Noticing that Lady Suiren was still nervous, Lady Maika thought for a bit before starting to talk in a completely informal manner.

“You know, I’m from a farm village too. Don’t worry about manners; I don’t usually talk like that either.”

Hearing the expedition party leader’s casual response, Lady Suiren blinked repeatedly. After a pause, she then let out the third and biggest sigh of relief.

“I’m glad to hear that. I’m embarrassed to say this, but I haven’t been able to attend the military academy, so I don’t really know how to conduct myself in situations like this...”

I nodded along. Looking at the state of things in this village, no one would have blamed her. In order to join the academy, you not only needed to be of a certain age and social standing, but you also needed the funds to pay for your stay in the city. There were no tuition fees for the academy, and accommodation was free as well, but there was a fixed fee to cover food expenses and equipment costs. Of course, you also needed some money to buy personal stuff and pay for other daily expenses not covered by the academy.

For a family of farmers, raising those funds would have been pretty much impossible. Even Lady Maika and I had used the village funds. Ajole village must not have been able to raise enough money to pay for Lady Suiren’s study expenses. This world’s upper class would have considered this a lack of essential education. No wonder Lady Suiren felt so nervous.

“That’s fine. It’s not like we’re here for a formal dinner party. We just want information about your village, so just speak however you feel comfortable. That way it’s easier for us too.”

“I see. I feel a bit relieved. Anyway, let me take you to my dad, the village chief.”

“Yes, please. By the way, has it already been decided where our party is supposed to stay? If so, I’d like everyone to drop their luggage there while I go greet the village chief.”

“Oh, I forgot! Yes, that has been arranged. There are several empty houses near the village chief’s house—you can stay there. However, they haven’t really been cleaned or looked after...”

“Don’t worry, that’s fine! Much more comfortable than sleeping outside, right everyone?”

The whole expedition party agreed in unison to Lady Maika’s question. It appeared that the hastily organized party had solidified its unity over the course of the journey. I could only call it a result of Lady Maika’s gift to win people over.

As Lady Sui ren once again walked off to lead the way, Lady Maika quietly moved next to me. “Do you think that was okay? Was I not too informal? I just thought that it would be difficult to carry out our investigations if our host is too nervous.”

“I think you did great. She was indeed a bit too nervous.” I probably would have made the same judgment if I had been in charge of negotiations.

“However, I am a bit worried that if you get too close to her, you may end up getting involved too deeply with this village.”

No matter how you looked at it, reviving this village required a huge amount of labor. I was not sure if the Sacula region was currently up to that task. While there were resources available, there were many other villages that wanted their share. It would have been much harder to make a coldhearted judgment call with the poor girl’s face on her mind.

“Yeah, you’re right... I’ll try my best to not get too attached.”

My face looked just as uneasy as Lady Maika's as I shrugged my shoulders. *I mean, I'm not sure I can properly detach myself either...* Even now, I was aching with feelings of guilt towards Ajole village, which had no signs of life compared to Adele. Until now, I had some serious doubts, but it seemed that I was human after all. That was indeed partly unexpected. Although my blood had always been red.

Suiren's Perspective

According to the messenger, people were going to visit from the city. Some sort of expedition party. Today I was standing stock still at the village's entrance, waiting for that party thing. Looking over the place where I had been born and raised, it wasn't pretty by any standard, but it was really quiet. While the sun stood high up in the sky, even the grass seemed to be sleeping, and it felt as if it were the middle of the night.

"I wonder when they'll be here."

They were nowhere to be seen. I felt disoriented. It must've been because I'd been exposed to this silence all by myself. It was as if I were inside a dream—everything felt vague. Even my clenched fist seemed to dissolve and disappear with just a light breeze. The occasional stares that I felt on my back must have come from the villagers inside their houses. The battered houses coupled with the deserted streets made the villagers appear like corpses peeking out from beyond the grave.

This is no good. I shouldn't think about scary stuff. There had been too many funerals these past two years. I closed my eyes to forget my eerie vision of the village.

"Everything will be fine. They will help us."

According to my dad, the people I was waiting for were going to rescue us out of this crisis. I wasn't sure if it was all right for me to welcome these people all by myself—they were our only option after all. Seeing how the crop failures continued and my dad was ill... That was what my dad had said at least—this was our only option left. And he was right. Since Adele village had stopped helping us, this village had been hopelessly lost.

For the first time in a while, I remembered the face of my childhood friend. It was the image of her crying on the day we had fought and split up. I felt a burning sensation running through my eyes and nose, as if someone had stuck a sharp needle through my foggy brain.

This is no good. I shouldn't be looking back on such painful memories. I shut my eyes and pushed the memory back into the dark void. However, the burning pain in my nose and eyes did not go away immediately.

For a moment, it felt like my brain fog was clearing up, but it was no use. Random thoughts kept popping into my head. Scary ones, painful ones, sad ones, distressing ones. All the thoughts that I had been ignoring came to the surface at once. The pain from today's empty stomach. The fear of next winter. The horror of my starving neighbors. The shame of being a country bumpkin who was about to meet people from the city.

My heart was beating fast, as if it wanted to alert me of an incoming danger. No matter how many deep breaths I took, the pain inside my chest did not subside. A cold sweat was running down my back. When? When had my chest started to hurt? Just now? Or had I just ignored it until now, and it had really been there ever since my dad had told me to take care of things today?

I felt sick. Or rather, I had felt sick this whole time. *I can't do this.* A voice spoke to me from the depths of my mind. I wanted to run away. *Yeah, I should run.* As my eyes wandered about to find an escape route, I saw a group approaching from the direction of Adele village. *It's them.* I had to run away from them—the source of my uneasiness. *I mean, I don't know what to do.* No one had taught me how to conduct myself in a situation like this. I hadn't been to the academy and my dad hadn't taught me anything either. So, I had to—

For some reason, the crying face of my childhood friend appeared out of the darkness. She grabbed my sleeves and told me to stay. Why did you come to my mind at a time like this? *Tell me, Renge.* Why did I think of you now, when I was on the verge of tears from all the pain, even though you were no longer supposed to be a pleasant memory?

I shut my eyes tight and pushed back all my negative thoughts—including my desire to run away—back into the dark void. I knew that running away wasn't

going to solve anything. That was why I had to ask those people for help. I stood up and raised my face. My mind had become blank. I was scared, anxious, embarrassed, and my legs were shaking. I felt like running in the opposite direction at any moment.

As I tried my best not to run away, the people from the city arrived in front of me. They were led by a boy and a girl who looked younger yet more mature than me. I ignored my thoughts telling me someone like me couldn't do this. The cold pain emanating from my heart and spreading through my whole body was so bad that it felt like I was going to collapse. My desire to run away grew even stronger.

My thoughts were spilling from my head like water from a broken pot, and I no longer knew what I was supposed to do. Even so, my parched mouth started moving.

“Are you...the people who sent a message...about coming to check on us? Is that you?”

I managed to speak! I realized that was no big achievement, but I was proud of it nonetheless. Slowly, I returned to my senses. The broken pot that was my head was being repaired with clay. It almost seemed as if my childhood friend were smiling a little inside the darkness.



It was no surprise, but there was an extraordinarily large number of vacant houses in Ajole village. The expedition party's members only rejoiced for a brief moment at the opportunity to stretch out and relax inside a house. They asked themselves whether this village was doing okay with a worried look on their faces. Of course it was not doing okay.

I assigned the accommodation to the soldiers who were aware of the village's situation and instructed them all to gather after dropping off their luggage. With Lady Maika gone, I was the next in command. Besides, I was the highest-ranking officer present as the adjutant of Sir George, whose troops made up the majority of this party. Accordingly, everyone followed my orders.

The willingness of those young lads and middle-aged men to obey the commands of a child like me reflected the proficiency of Sacula's military. It was

a testament to the academy's excellent teaching methods, which prepared you to receive orders properly. Since most superior officers had also been trained at the academy and adhered to the proper code of conduct, it was easy for the troops to adapt to a new officer.

"All right, everyone! Let us arrange the stockpiled food we brought for distribution. Looking at the situation here, they will need it sooner rather than later." Everyone present concurred. "Also, please make sure that there is always someone guarding the food," I ordered in a loud voice, so that it could be heard by the villagers observing us from the shadows. "Of course, we came here to hand out the food, so it would not really matter if someone just took it, but..."

That was a lie. It would have been a huge problem if someone just took the food without permission. Undoubtedly, that would lead to an uproar among the villagers, decrying the injustice of someone taking more than their fair share. Providing it would stop at verbal complaints, that would still be manageable, but given the village's famine situation, it was likely to quickly escalate to violence. And it would have been my job to suppress that uproar. I preferred to avoid a messy event like that altogether.

"It would not really matter, but there are probably some items which have spoiled even further during transportation. Moreover, many of the products have to be properly heated before consumption, so we will cook them and then distribute them. Please inform all the villagers that they will have to wait for their turn as we distribute the food equally."

Above anything else, overconsumption was a potential problem if the villagers were left to their own devices. Compared to other mammals, human digestion and absorption are superior, but that also means that they are not very fuel-efficient. If they did not consume the food according to a properly managed schedule, bringing all this food from afar would become pointless.

"You all know what to do. Please start working."

The rest was easy, since all the veteran soldiers were going to take care of the finer details. Sir George's troops were already familiar with the stockpiles' contents, so they were in charge of organizing them. The troops who regularly

patrolled this area and had met the villagers before were primarily in charge of guarding the food. Without any word from me, they lined up the food in order of expiry date and asked the villagers who were hiding from view to wait their turn. What outstanding soldiers!

As I considered including a performance evaluation in the expedition report, Lady Maika came back from her visit to the village chief, accompanied by Lady Suiren.

“Back already?”

“Yes, the village chief was not feeling well at all... And you’re also pretty fast at setting things up.”

“It seemed better to start the food distribution as soon as possible. May I ask how many people currently live in this village?”

When I looked towards Lady Suiren, she let out a shriek and became flustered.

“Don’t pressure her like that!” Lady Maika scolded me.

Am I pressuring her?

“You’re too fast. You can’t just suddenly ambush someone inexperienced with a task! Didn’t I tell you the same thing with Renge?”

“You did indeed.” *That wasn’t meant as a joke? Besides, look at how well the expedition party is holding up!*

“Keep that in mind! The expedition party is an exception; they have been trained to adapt after spending so much time with you.”

“But they were all quite talented from the start, right?”

“That’s true. I’m surprised at how well they have learned to keep up with you in such a short time.” Lady Maika sighed as if she were talking to a dense, younger peer.

At the same time, a soldier from the unit that usually patrolled this area joined in the conversation with a proud smile. “‘Cause Sir George’s troops taught us quite a bit. Joining different units together is usually a recipe for quarrels, but this time it was actually helpful. Ha ha ha!” The middle-aged man

sauntered off while laughing.

Lady Maika sent me a stare that said “You see what I mean?” For some reason, it felt like I was the bad guy here. *Must be my imagination.*

“More importantly, how many people live in the village? We need to calculate how many days the supply will last and then we can start giving out the food tonight. And if we knew what your food storage looks like, we could also take that into consideration when making plans.”

“Huh? What? U-Um... Maika, what should I say?” Lady Sui ren muttered.

“Of course, if you intend to make a distribution plan yourselves, we will leave it to you. However, in that case, I will need to give you some explanations. You need to be careful regarding the state of some of these food items,” I continued.

“Wait a moment! Maika?! Maikaaa?!”

“Ah, it’s too late. Once he starts, nothing can stop him. My bad for not noticing before it was too late.”



It ended up taking quite some time to get the necessary information from Lady Suiren. In the end, we reached the conclusion that Ajole village did not have the resources or leeway to plan and implement the food distribution, so it became the expeditionary party's task.

However, given the nature of the stockpiled food, the only real meal option was a stew. Either way, we just heated it up, stirred it, and concealed the flavor by diluting it with water and tossing in herbs. That was all—not very difficult. The more complicated task was to calculate the optimal ration size, so that the food would last until the next harvest. The only person capable of doing such an advanced calculation was the village chief, who lay ill in bed.

Lady Suiren apologetically lowered her head. “I am really sorry to make you do all these things.”

“You do not need to apologize. Can you show me the village's food storage? Inspecting your stock is also one of our objectives this time around. It will help me make plans for the food distribution.”

Since that task was a bit too much for just one person, I asked Lady Maika and several people from Sir George's troops—including Glen—to come along. It was a good opportunity for Glen, who was currently training to improve his intellectual capabilities, to gather some experience. Moreover, my instructions for Glen could also serve as an explanation for Lady Suiren, who was watching over us.

Since the food storage was a lot emptier than expected, we finished rather quickly, but that was not a good sign. It only further increased my worries for the future.

“For the time being, you are not going to starve to death with the supplies from Adele village.”

“Really?! That's amazing! You know that just from looking around?”

Lady Suiren's eyes were sparkling, but this was not actually great news. It merely meant that the villagers were not going to starve to death, but they were still going to be famished. And only so long as the food did not decrease any further and the distribution schedule was respected. All in all, we needed

more reserves.

“I did not see any dried meat. Do you not have a hunter here?”

“No, the last one died a few years ago.”

It appeared that there was a lack of successors everywhere. It was a shame considering the village lay right next to a forest. Not only was it a shame, though—it was dangerous as well.

“Does that mean that there are a lot of beasts from the forest laying waste to your fields?”

“Mmh? No. Not that I’ve heard.”

“Come again?”

Cultivated fields were a convenient feeding ground for wild animals. In contrast to the woods, where they had to roam around to find food, here it was all neatly planted in a single place. Not to mention that cultivated vegetables were much tastier than wild-growing food. Once they knew the field’s location, wild beasts were shameless enough to visit daily and bring along their whole family. It was part of a hunter’s job to prevent such a scenario. Hunters killed the beasts before they could approach the village and set up traps on their trails.

Setting aside the hunting and gathering era, in agricultural societies hunters acted as a sort of police officer guarding against wild animals. In my hometown, Noscula, Ban was bearing that heavy responsibility. Therefore, not having any animals approach the village without such a police officer being present was nothing short of a miracle.

“You said that he died a few years ago, right? And there have not been any animal attacks since then?”

“I don’t think so. I’ve never heard of any animals approaching.”

In my experience, miracles did not come about so easily in this world. If there was no hunter at the top of the food chain, the total number of animals must have been growing. Especially in the span of several years. It was too unnatural that none of them had approached a defenseless field.

Come to think of it, Adele and Ajole village were close to each other. Looking at the map, they were practically neighbors, with the forest in between acting as a border, and yet the year before last Adele village had suffered terrible damage from wild animals. I was hesitant to say this, but was it possible that Ajole village was somehow the cause of Adele's wild animal damage?

Since that was not something that I could ask Lady Sui ren, I stealthily asked Lady Maika instead.

"I'm not sure myself, but if you're saying that as someone who trained as Ban's apprentice, it sounds quite plausible. I also think it's weird that no animals are approaching the fields."

"Yes, it is strange. However, I cannot think of an explanation why they would go to Adele but not Ajole."

"Maybe because Adele has larger fields?"

It did not seem likely that a wild animal would come up with the idea to aim for the larger field. Although, if we were talking about a fantastical life form such as a demon, I was not sure.

"For now, we should probably go have a look inside the forest tomorrow. What do you think, Chief Maika?"

"All right. However, I won't allow you to go on your own. You have to take someone with you. Understood?"

I guess I'll take Glen along, then. I had already taught him some techniques during our camping trip back at the academy, so he somewhat knew how to conduct himself when tagging along.

After a casual briefing, I once again pondered the neighborhood's state and let out a sigh.

"At any rate, to think that it may be necessary for Ajole to be in a healthy state in order to maintain Adele's production... Managing a region sure is tough."

"Oh, I hadn't thought of it that way, but you're right." Lady Maika agreed to my murmur, but seemed annoyed for not noticing herself.

It was not enough to just favorably treat the area with the highest production. Even areas that appeared to have a bad track record could possibly be helping to generate profit in a different way. While it was not confirmed that this was the case this time around, there was no doubt that it would have been advantageous if Adele and Ajole shared the forest management. That way it would be possible for one of them to provide assistance to the other if they were to suffer some misfortune.

“It shows how dangerous it can be to abruptly advance things without carefully considering the issue and carrying out detailed checks. It just ends up in terrible failure.”

“Yeah. But don’t worry—I’ll make sure this won’t happen to you!” Lady Maika clenched her fist and looked as serious as when she crossed swords.

I was aware that I often tackled problems rather quickly, but did it really require that much determination to stop me?

While deciding what should be done during our short stay in Ajole, we promptly started preparing food. We did not ask the villagers for help, so it was just the expedition party cooking. All the villagers were so on edge that if we had allowed anyone to join us, there would have been complaints that they had received more food than others, even if it was merely a sample. For now, we were just going to distribute the food equally today and tomorrow, and hopefully that would calm them down.

Exceptionally, a shy Lady Sui ren had asked to help us. Considering her standing, it probably would have been an issue if she had left all the hard work to the people who provided the food aid. I allowed her to join us.

While it was mostly the soldiers’ task to cook, Lady Maika and I also helped. Just because we were the supervisors, that did not mean that we could just lie around on our backs. Especially since we were also preparing the food for the villagers. We swiftly chopped the sun-dried radish and dried meat into thin slices. If you cut the horrible-tasting food into small enough pieces, you could gulp it down in one go until your stomach was filled. That was a lesson we had learned during our tough camping trip.

“Y-You both are amazing at this!” Lady Sui ren timidly said as Lady Maika and I were cooking side by side. I wondered what was so amazing. “I mean, you’re both so smart, and you’re good at cooking. Isn’t that amazing? Did you learn that at the academy?”

She was right that our cooking skills had improved. All thanks to the bandit cook’s tough lessons.

“I guess you could say that you somewhat learn how to cook at the academy,” I said.

“Chef Yacoo taught us. He’s also in charge of the kitchen at the count’s mansion.”

“Wow... The academy really is something else...”

Upon hearing this, Glen—who was carrying some ingredients—changed his expression and rushed over to the envious-looking Lady Sui ren.

“Wait! You can’t put all the academy graduates on the same level as these two. That wouldn’t be fair to their contemporaries or seniors!”

“Is that so? Wh-Why?”

As Lady Sui ren tilted her head in confusion, Glen solemnly nodded and picked out a herb from the ingredients he was carrying.

“I was in the same class as these two, and yet look at this.”

With his chunky hand, Glen put the herb on the chopping board and readied the knife. At that moment, Lady Maika and I both reflexively called him out.

“Glen, that is not how you are supposed to cut the herb.”

“You have to turn it sideways or it won’t taste as nice.”

After freezing for a few seconds, Glen laid down the knife with a solemn expression.

“They stopped me faster than I expected... But you see what I’m getting at, right? It’s true that I’m not the best at cooking, but I’m not the worst either among my colleagues.”

“They are so amazing that they even pay close attention to how they cut the

ingredients,” Lady Suiren remarked.

You had to pay close attention, because this one small touch could completely change the taste. As a former disciple of Chef Yacoo, I could not compromise.

“And of course, they are both smart, but even in that regard, they are special.”

“I-Is that so?”

“Yep. You saw how they both taught me earlier at the food storage? It’s amazing how they know right away what to do in a situation like that. I only know how to act after someone teaches me.”

Lady Suiren was clearly impressed as she looked our way.

For some reason, Glen seemed proud when he noticed her reaction. “Even the Church considered our class the best in the history of the military academy. And these two are the reason. From the very beginning, they were at an advanced level. And once they graduated, they were entrusted with a new department—that’s how special they are.”

“Oh, I thought that it was incredible for someone so young to be in charge, but I didn’t realize they were so exceptional. I just assumed that’s what happens when you graduate from the academy.”

“Nope, they are outliers. These two are the only ones. Everyone else—including me—are just apprentices or rookies.”

“Wow, so they really are amazing, huh? What did they do to receive such special treatment?”

“Well, how should I put it... They made quite a mess.”

Lady Maika and I looked at each other as we noticed both of them engaging in a lively conversation. Our eye contact was synchronized. It appeared that Lady Suiren’s nerves had calmed down, so we decided to leave the two alone for the sake of a smooth relationship between Ajole and the expedition party. Lady Maika and I resumed cooking.

Suiren’s Perspective

The people from the expedition party with the long name were nicer than expected, but also scarier. Maika, the girl in charge, was the nice one. She was very considerate towards me, and thanks to her, I was able to show the way to my dad, the village chief. Ash, the boy in charge, was the scary one. It's not like he was violent or anything, but I didn't know what to reply when he rapidly fired off his questions...

Either way, and as expected from someone coming from the city and leading soldiers who were older than themselves, both of them were amazing. Although I wasn't sure what exactly was so incredible.

Glen, one of the party members whom I had befriended, told me about the two.

"Maika is the granddaughter of the count of Sacula."

I couldn't believe my ears. My face turned pale. "A-And I spoke so casually with her?!"

"Don't worry! She's very lenient in that regard. Like she said herself, she may even prefer to be addressed in a casual way, since she's from a farm village just like you." Glen tilted his head. "Although Lord Itsuki can also be quite casual sometimes, so it may be less related to her village upbringing and more to her family roots..."

"R-Really? Are you sure she doesn't mind?" I instinctively clung to Glen's arm. I didn't want to be cut down for causing offense.

"D-Don't worry. I usually act very familiar around Maika too. Although I obviously call her 'Chief' during work, since she is still my supervisor."

"Are you sure? You promise?" It may have sounded a bit persistent, but I asked repeatedly because I just couldn't get rid of my concerns. Glen assured me each and every time. "Thank goodness... Come to think of it, Maika did introduce herself as Amanobe when we met!"

Why hadn't I realized it at that point?! I couldn't believe I had messed up from the beginning. Not that I would have been able to properly greet her, but I had conducted myself in the worst way possible.

"I'm so mad at myself... Sorry for being such a country bumpkin... Sorry for

being so stupid that I don't even recognize the count's family name..." As I whimpered with both my hands covering up my face, Glen laughed awkwardly. "Do you think I'm a country bumpkin? I haven't studied much, so I can't help it..."

"No, I'm not in any position to judge others. I've felt ashamed countless times too, looking at these two and seeing how powerless I am in comparison," the boy said.

"You too?"

"Yeah. Maika is an exemplary student who is accomplished in both literary and military arts. I admire her, since I am not very smart myself."

Hearing that, I felt my lips bent downwards. *How unfair.*

"I guess people who are born into the count's family are just special," he remarked.

Not much can be done if their brilliance is tied to their blood.

"Yes, she comes from a wonderful lineage, but... Ash is even more amazing," Glen suddenly added.



Ash? He was even more amazing than the count's granddaughter? I wondered what family he could have possibly been from. However, the answer was completely beyond my expectations.

"He's the son of a farmer. And yet he's smarter than Maika, and strong enough to hold his own in a one-on-one fight with a werewolf."

"No way..."

In other words, he had been born into an even lower-ranking household than me. My "nothing can be done" didn't apply here.

"H-How?"

"He says that he was lucky and blessed with a good environment, but... Seeing how hard he works, I don't think that's all. He reads books almost every day, and duels with Maika in the mornings and evenings. He acts faster than anyone else and talks to more people than anyone else."

What a feat of strength. It forced awake anyone who had shut their eyes pretending that nothing could be done. Had he really overcome his social status by sheer effort?

"Is that true?"

"Well, look at him. He just keeps on going... Not much you can do."

His "not much you can do" sounded completely different than mine. It was not the kind of resignation where you closed your eyes and just pushed everything back into the dark void of your mind.

"Seeing him, I feel like I still have much work to do. I can still improve much more."

Instead, his words reflected the resignation of someone who had found a dazzling light—something beautiful. He couldn't help but admire it. There was "not much he could do" about his desire to reach out his hands towards that light.

"Are you doing all right?" I asked him.

Looking at the light. Reaching out towards it... It felt suffocating to me. My

eyes shut themselves.

“Hm... To be honest, it can be exhausting at times.” Glen went on to tell me about the time when he had to calculate the soldiers’ meals. “Back then, I really felt like running away. I somehow managed to pull through with my seniors yelling at me, but I don’t know what would’ve happened had I been on my own. Well, once I return, I’ll be back to doing work like that again.” He was serious—his face looked a bit pale. “But even so, I’ll still do the job. When I look at these two, it motivates me. Even if I look away or close my eyes, these two are too bright for me to give up.” Glen’s face also seemed to be shining a little when he proclaimed those words.

“What on earth did they do that makes you say that?”

“Like I said earlier, these two have made quite a mess. The time when they made Mrs. Rihn—a top-tier maid—cry left quite the strong impression on me.” Glen went on to tell the story, which was indeed quite impressive.

Wait. Am I supposed to show these people around tomorrow? No way... Those thoughts gradually rose from the bottom of my mind.

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The following morning, Glen overslept. He was called in front of Chief Maika, since being late for breakfast was unacceptable for a fresh recruit. There he gave an earnest apology and explained the reason. To put it simply, he had been with Lady Sui ren until the small hours of the morning. However, it did not seem like they had slept together or there had been any sensual interactions. Apparently, Lady Sui ren—who admired the city and the academy—had badgered him to talk about his own experiences there.

“Keep up the good work! It’d be great if our expedition party could build friendly relationships with our guide,” Chief Maika proclaimed in response to Glen’s explanation. All expedition members were also present, gulping down their breakfast.

Glen looked happy. He must have been relieved that he did not get scolded.

Thus, it became Glen’s official task to chat with Lady Sui ren, the village chief’s daughter. That may have sounded like an extremely easy job, but if you

referred to it as social interaction to gain the cooperation of an influential local figure, it became more serious.

In Adele, Lady Maika and I had been in charge of talking with the chief, and it had been a strictly business-related conversation. In that sense, Glen was ahead of us in terms of actual social relationships here in Ajole. Still, before he could get started on his new task, I needed him to accompany me to the forest.

Since we were only going to check on the shallow parts of the woods, light equipment was going to be good enough. Nonetheless, you never knew what was going to happen, so we both carried weapons as well as dried meat and hard bread. At the end of the day, it was not unheard-of for a ten-minute foraging trip to turn into a disaster.

As we stepped into the forest on the outskirts of Ajole, I immediately warned Glen. "Be prepared to draw your weapon at any time."

"Understood."

After adjusting his grip on the short spear that he was using as a walking cane, Glen asked me a question. "Is there something strange? To me it just looks like a normal forest."

"The forest is strangely dark and quiet. It is my first time here, so I cannot say for sure that it is unusual, but..."

"If you feel like something's off, I'll be quiet and watch out. Better safe than sorry."

"Thank you. I do not want to go too deep inside anyway, so let us wrap it up quickly."

Although we were only in the fringes of the woods, we both explored one step at a time while checking our surroundings.

"It does not feel right. We may not be far in, but there is not a single trace of a boar or deer."

"Yeah, that does sound strange. There hasn't been a hunter in Ajole for years, right?"

"Exactly. I can see traces of small animals and birds, but..."

There was no evidence of any medium-sized animals. No monkeys or bears. Was that why the forest was so dark? The fruits and sprouts that were supposed to be eaten by the herbivores just kept on growing. Aside from the large trees covering our heads, most plants had grown to our height, and the grass was growing so thick that it was hard to see anything. This was problematic in several ways; it could easily lead to an overpopulation of insects and small animals, as well as depletion of the soil. It was a miracle that had not happened yet. This ecosystem was not in a good state.

“Well, at the very least, there are a lot of summer edible plants.”

After walking only for a short while, we were greeted by lots of plants and herbs that were going to enrich tonight’s meal. We should have brought a bigger basket. *I could probably catch a squirrel as well, so I’ll put up some traps.*

“Ash, do we really need that much?”

“Given Ajole’s current situation, no amount of food is too much. But then again...”

Upon hearing Glen’s words, who looked like a forest spirit carrying a mass of plants, I stopped laying out the trap I was working on.

“I may have gotten a bit too excited. I was reminded of my time back at the village and felt the duty to procure as many ingredients as possible.”

“I see. Well, that’s not a bad thing.”

Glen’s wry smile was full of warmth. Had I really been that excited? I had only set up thirty small-animal traps so far.

“Let us go back for today, then. We managed to confirm that there are a lot of edible plants growing wild here, so we should come back every day for as long as we stay.”

“We should also bring something to carry all the plants. No matter how careful we are, we can’t really defend ourselves like this.”

Looking at it purely from a work-optimization point of view, I agreed with Glen, who no longer looked like a knight apprentice at all with all the plants he was carrying. I wanted to restock many more ingredients after all.

The forest exploration was followed by an inspection of the fields. Our guide, Lady Suiren, was quite nervous as she consented to our request to inspect their farming work.

“You see, Ash? This is because you overwhelmed her with your usual enthusiasm yesterday...”

“Is that really my fault? I think I asked politely.”

“Too politely. It was so impeccable that it was scary.”

After Lady Maika’s lecture, I apologized to Lady Suiren for yesterday’s behavior and promised to take better care today.

“N-Not at all! M-Me too! I-I-I’ll try my best...in good conscience... I look forward to working with you!”

“Yes, me too.” I bowed to Lady Suiren and then immediately smiled at Lady Maika.

“Maika, I don’t think this is going to work,” Glen said.

“Yeah, me neither.”

No matter how you looked at it, Lady Suiren was in no state to be a proper guide, so we had Glen come along as an intermediary under the guise of being our escort. For the time being, we just had him chat with Lady Suiren—who had already reached her limits—while Lady Maika and I looked around the fields.

I had already suspected as much on our way to the village yesterday, but the situation was indeed dire. Due to the inattentive management, some crops were covered in weeds, or different types were growing all jumbled together. As a result, I was not able to tell which plots were reserved for summer or fall and which ones were idle.

After having a look around, I tried asking Lady Maika. “Maika, do you know which fields are for fall harvest?”

“No idea. Did you find the idle plots?”

“I am afraid not...”

Both our expressions screamed “this is bad!” Their crop rotation had failed. Trying to get this back to normal was going to require a lot of effort and money. How had it come to this?

In order to gain some insight, I asked our guide. “Suiren, how on earth does Ajole village currently— Um. I mean, is there someone who gives directions and takes the lead?”

Lady Suiren looked puzzled as she replied in a quiet voice. She must have guessed from my tone that I was lecturing her. “No, we don’t have anyone like that...”

“So, currently everyone uses their own field separately?”

“Yes. People use the plot they want because there are so many free ones, since many farmers passed away.”

Apparently, they had dispersed their manpower even further after the population had dwindled. It was the exact opposite of Adele village’s strategy. The fields’ condition was poor, there was not enough manpower, there were no leaders, and there was no unity among the villagers. I was at a loss. I did not know how to revive this village’s agriculture.

“Are there any discussions about your current problems going on?”

“Um... I’ve heard my father and Uncle Marco talk about it.”

“Who is Uncle Marco?”

He had the same name as Adele’s village chief. I felt bad for Lady Suiren, but I honestly wished Chief Marco were in charge of this village as well.

“Uncle Marco is the chief of Adele village.”

And she was in fact speaking about the person in question. Who would have thought? The villages were close to one another, but what was he doing discussing the neighboring village’s affairs?

“We met with Chief Marco from Adele before coming here,” I said.

“Oh, really? Is he doing all right?”

He looked better than anyone in this village. Their food situation was stable.

“Do your father and Chief Marco get along well?”

“Well... They were friends.” I guessed the rest from her use of the past tense and Ajole’s current situation. “But two years ago, they had an argument and exchanged some harsh words...”

I acknowledged it with a nod. If this had happened two years ago, it must have been when Adele was attacked by wild animals. I imagined that stress had contributed to Chief Marco’s harsh words. On top of that, Ajole had been in crisis for quite some time, so Chief Louis must have reciprocated the inflammatory language, and from there the situation just got worse.

“Do you remember what they argued about? Maybe it could be a hint to solving this problem.”

“He...” Lady Suiren fell silent, as if she wanted to swallow down the words that had just tried to escape her mouth. She seemed annoyed, possibly because her attempt was painful. For a while, there was a feeling of high tension in the air before she finally opened her mouth. “He asked us to move to Adele.”

“I see...”

Sensing an even greater danger than earlier, I tried to swiftly move the conversation along. It was a delicate matter ready to explode at any moment if handled carelessly. Still, I felt inclined to agree that the proposal to move to Adele may have been the best solution. In fact, I had reached the conclusion that Ajole was not going to recover. And even if they were, they probably needed to rebuild the village from scratch. Considering the effort and resources necessary, abandoning the village and moving to Adele was probably the best solution. Adele was willing to receive the people from Ajole that had lost their home.

Chief Marco must have been quite determined to make such a proposal two years ago, at a time when his own people were suffering. He had only made it because he was convinced that they were going to recover from the wild animal attack. The man had a lot of confidence in both himself and his daughter Renge. Confidence that was justified by their talent. Even still, Ajole village had not accepted Chief Marco’s proposal.

Lady Suiren’s red eyes indicated her shaking anger. Since our guide was rather

worked up, I decided to wrap up today's inspection. I had already confirmed that this was not a situation that could be easily solved.

I clapped my hands and signaled the end for today. "I have a lot to think about. Let us end the investigation for today." Then, I immediately went to talk to Lady Maika. "Do you have time? I want to ask you for advice."

"Of course. Is it regarding the fields?"

As I nodded, we walked off together. Lady Suiren and Glen were left behind and exchanged glances, puzzled at the sudden development. *Just have some fun chatter and help her calm down again, Glen.*

"After seeing the fields here..." Lady Maika murmured with a neutral expression, "I think the situation is best summed up by the phrase 'even a sage can't measure the sky.'"

It was a saying of this world, which meant that you were at a loss. It originated from a story about a person called "the great sage," who was at a complete loss when he was asked "how wide is the sky?" after boasting about his own wisdom to the monkey god, the god of wisdom.

Lady Maika had used it as a roundabout expression—she could not bring herself to say out loud that she could not think of any method to deal with this village's crisis.

"What do you think, Ash?"

"I concur wholeheartedly. Chief Marco's proposal is the most realistic solution."

"I thought so too." Lady Maika held her cheek and let out a sigh. It was the stress of a person who understood that, while it was the most realistic solution, it was still difficult to implement. "No farmer wants to willingly give up their field."

She had pointed out the biggest obstacle, which turned the objectively best solution into an unrealistic option. Farmers considered their plot of land an indispensable asset—a part of their existence. It was an essential difference between them, nomad folk or hunters, and gatherers, who repeatedly moved from land to land.

One may even say that farmers were similar to the crops they cultivated—they spread their roots and grew in the same plot of land. Telling them to move to a different land was like pulling out wheat and replanting it into a different plot. Unless it was done extremely carefully, the wheat was just going to wither in its new location.

“Now that I think about it, you readily—or even happily—left the village, didn’t you?” Lady Maika asked.

Being the flawless son of a farmer that I was, I let out a chuckle upon hearing Lady Maika’s question.

Saying that farmers were like their crops was of course just a metaphor. Humans are not like plants. We are able to move around according to our own will. That is why we are classified as animals and not plants. Moving to a different land is not a life-or-death situation like it is for delicate plants. Humans had evolved to move around the world. Accordingly, the farmers’ attachment to their plots was mere sentiment—love for the land where they were born and fear of the unknown.

To be honest, it aggravated me to think that an evolutionary trait that had developed over a span of time that might as well be an eternity to a single organism was being disregarded because of sentiment. It was rude towards evolution. Nevertheless, feelings are still a big part of human life. Ajole village was a testament to the importance of mere sentiment. Chief Marco had not solved the issue; he had failed to reach an agreement, which had put Ajole into an existential abyss. Sentiment was a matter of life and death to humans.

“If they only had the confidence that they could carry on their lives even after leaving behind their land, or that they could restart their lives, maybe they would change their minds.”

But I did not know how to give that confidence to the people who had only known this place. Even Lady Suiren, the village chief’s daughter, thought it was a preposterous idea.

“Hm... Confidence, huh?” Lady Maika looked at me as she pondered a possible solution. “Ah, I get it. You managed to leave straight away for the city because you were confident that you could carry on your life no matter where

you went.”

“I would not necessarily say that...”

No, maybe she was right. That may have been the case. It was true that I had not had any concerns regarding life and death. Or you could say that I had been so excited that I had not even thought about the consequences.

“But even when I left the village, I was still with you,” I said.

“O-Oh. You didn’t worry because you were with me?”

Since Noscula village’s chief had decided to support me financially, I had had no worries regarding food, clothes, and shelter.

As I nodded with a smile, Lady Maika put both her hands on her cheeks. “Tee hee. I see, I see. Of course, I also feel at ease with you around!”

“Is that so? Thank you.”

Lady Maika really did have guts to say that she felt at ease around me when I kept on diving into strange new projects one after the other. As expected from the daughter of Goddess Yuika.

Suiren’s Perspective

I remember pushing away her extended hand.

Once I’d seen her teary eyes, I’d realized that my words had hurt her. All she had said was “Let’s live together.” My childhood friend had reached out her hand, asking me to leave the village where I had been born and start over in a wealthier place.

“Are you telling me to abandon my village?”

I think that’s what I said when pushing away her hand.

“That’s not what I mean, Suiren! Your fields have reached their limits and Adele can no longer support you. Ajole won’t be able to hold out at this rate!”

“But I can’t just abandon this place! I was born here! It’s special to me!”

That was a lie. I knew this better than anyone. After all, how much did I

normally think about the village? My childhood friend, who was able to estimate the harvest yields, probably thought much more about it than me... But I closed my eyes to that reality. I hated it. I hated the miserable feeling that welled up inside of me.

My childhood friend was a shy and fainthearted person—I always led her by the hand when we played together. And yet she had graduated from the academy where I couldn't go. She had learned how to manage a village. She had become an outstanding person...

I felt so miserable about the prospect of her helping me because I hadn't been able to do anything for my starving village. But that was not all. Looking at how much my childhood friend had matured, I couldn't see myself becoming anything like her. I felt hopeless—inside my mind there was a dim, flickering light that seemed on the verge of going out. Maybe if I did my best from here on out, I could find a light on top of the steep hill, shining as bright as a star, but...

No! It was impossible for me. There was no way. I could've never reached that light, shining like an illusion at the end of a long and winding road. What if I failed? What if I never arrived? What if the light had disappeared by the time I got there? What if it was all just an illusion and there was nothing there to begin with?

I couldn't bear that fear. I would have rather stayed the way I was. Hungry—not knowing whether I was going to have something to eat the next day. Suffering. In pain. But at least I knew this pain and suffering. I had managed to make it through yesterday. And today. Therefore, maybe I was going to make it through tomorrow too. That was why I was fine with the way things were.

I was weaker than my timid childhood friend, but as long as I didn't have to face an unknown fear, I was able to put up with this reality. Everything was fine as it was. Everything was okay. I was sure our situation was going to improve before long. Someone was going to save us—someone like my childhood friend, who had graduated from the academy I couldn't join. Just like that, I convinced myself as I closed my eyes yet again.

And finally, someone had come to save us. As expected, they were graduates

from the academy and extremely reliable. But their assistance was a bit different from what I had expected.

“Okay, Suiren. I arranged this wheat so that the older ones are at the front and the newer ones at the back. You should consume them starting with the ones at the front. Now, here is a question for you. If you used two bags a day, how many days would the wheat last you?”

“U-Um... One, two, three... Wait. How far did I count?”

“Counting one-by-one is inefficient! The more time and effort it takes, the easier it is to make a mistake. This is why you should use multiplication, which I taught you earlier. There are five wheat bags in a row, and there are ten columns, so how many are there in total? Glen, answer!”

“Using multiplication, you do five times ten, Suiren. It’s fifty bags!”

“Well done! Now tell me, Suiren. How long will these fifty bags last if you use two per day?”

“Um, um...! I-I don’t know!”

“No, you do! Just think about it! Do not worry! We are pressed on time, so I will not hold back, but I will not abandon you either! Trust me!”

Sorry for trying to show off! It was not just a bit, but a lot different from what I had expected. Even though I had surrendered, Ash did not let me admit defeat. Was I really being saved? It felt more like an assault, or a punishment... It felt like the punishment where your body was pulled apart by horses... However, he was very patient and taught me the same thing over and over again, so it also felt very considerate. *Yeah, I think he’s helping, right?*

“Why are you giving up already? If you give up, the project is done for! You need to use division, which I taught you earlier. What? You do not remember it? All right, let us review it then!”

But Ash’s energy was so overwhelming that it didn’t feel like help after all! Not even in the slightest! *Someone help me! We’ve only just met, but please save me, Glen!*

“A-Ash, don’t you think it’s a bit too much for Suiren?”

Thanks, Glen! Honestly, if it hadn't been for Glen—who was helping Ash teach me—my mind would've exploded already. *Really, thank you...* Glen looked a bit rugged and scary, but he was kind and reliable.

"Glen, you are so kind! But you need to turn into a demon and continue the lesson! This level of arithmetic is indispensable for the food distribution project's continuation after we are gone. I imagine Sui ren does not want to go hungry either, right? Okay, let us start reviewing!"

Glen gave me an extremely pitiful look.

Yeah, I get it. He won't stop, right? Aha ha ha. There's "nothing you can do." At that moment, I realized that there are some things that yank open your eyes even if you close them.

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Paper Hates Blanks

We inspected Ajole village for three more days. Most of that time was not spent observing their farming practices, but rather planning the food distribution scheme, and above all preparing the village to carry it out by itself. In order to allocate the rations inside the food storage so that they would last until the next big harvest, there needed to be a local person in command. Since we were bound to return to the city, we could not take on that position. Usually, that responsibility would have fallen to Ajole's village chief, but since he was lying ill in bed, it became Lady Suiren's job. Ajole faced a serious shortage of human resources, so there was no one else we could rely on. In that sense, I felt sincere regret that Lady Suiren had fainted from all the intense studying.

"I wonder if Suiren's fine." Glen, who had crammed together with Lady Suiren, voiced his concerns on our way back to the city.

I had roped him in for a mix of reasons. First, it had helped ease Lady Suiren's tension. Moreover, it is said that learning together with friends is more effective. And secondly, I had hoped that it would also improve Glen's skills. By way of cramming together, the two had become quite close. Difficult situations tend to bring people together.

After returning to the city, we went to greet Lord Itsuki to inform him of the expedition's success. As compensation, everyone received some time off work. Well, everyone except Lady Maika and I—we had to summarize the expedition party's accomplishments and exchange opinions to compile a report on our actions moving forward.

"I'm exhausted."

"Yes, it was very tiring."

"I want to rest."

"Agreed, that would be nice."

While having a conversation that was unusually mature for people in their early teens, we entered the promotion office.

“Oh, welcome back.”

Lady Renge had stayed behind by herself. Her admirable smile made it clear that she had been waiting for us.

“I am glad you safely accomplished your difficult task,” she said.

“Renge,” Lady Maika called to the eagerly working maid with a serious look, speaking as her supervisor, “you get a raise.”

“Huh? What? Wh-Why? I didn’t do anything.”

I knew where Lady Maika was coming from. I had no objections. Man or woman, anyone’s heart would have melted when faced with her warm consideration towards someone who had just returned from a tiring journey.

After admiring the confused Lady Renge for a short while, I started talking about the expedition while holding the tea that one of the servants had poured us.

“Thus, there is no longer any need to worry about Adele village. Thanks to Chief Marco’s excellent guidance, they are mostly able to deal with the situation by themselves. As one would expect from your father. It was a learning experience.”

“Y-You flatter me too much...”

Lady Renge was a quiet and bashful person who became easily flustered when praised.

After I had finished telling her about the situation in Adele village, Lady Renge timidly asked, “What... What about A-Ajole village?”

“I am afraid I have bad news. Do you want to hear it?”

Lady Renge’s voice had been filled with determination, but I wanted to make sure she was ready to hear it. We had concluded that it was probably best to abandon the village, so she was not going to find much relief in my words.

Guessing the severity of the situation from my tone, Lady Renge frowned.

“Two years ago we learned that Ajole village was in a rough spot.”

“Two years ago... I’ve heard that Chief Marco went to visit the village then,” Lady Maika said.

“Yes, I went with him.” Lady Renge expressed her regret with a bittersweet smile. “My father didn’t want to continue my grandfather’s policy and tried to reestablish trade between our villages. At the same time, he worked towards rebuilding Ajole village.”

“That does not sound like an easy task. If you want to establish relationships with people suffering from hunger and poverty, you first have to fulfill their basic needs before you can engage in any dialogue.”

Throughout the history of life on Earth, people had fought over resources without refining the art of trade. It was a way to interact with others without coming to a mutual understanding. Personally, though, I preferred a more cultured exchange.

“My father talked many times over with Uncle Louis and tried different approaches, such as sharing Adele’s food and renting out tools.”

Louis was the name of Ajole’s village chief, whom the majority of the expedition party had not seen. Hearing Lady Renge call him “uncle” rather than referring to his job title highlighted Chief Marco’s efforts. He must have been taking great pains to treat them as his own next of kin in order to maintain their exchange.

“However, none of these approaches really worked. On top of that, two years ago Adele village suffered great damages from a wild animal attack and could no longer continue supporting Ajole.”

“There is not much you could have done. Charity is only possible as long as the giver is wealthy enough. Besides, even if Adele wanted to show goodwill and kindness towards Ajole, they had no obligation to go above and beyond.”

There was no need for Adele’s villagers to suffer over this. On the contrary, they should pat themselves on the back for doing so much even though they were not obliged to do so.

Nevertheless, that did not lift the mood of the kind Lady Renge. She closed

her eyes and shook her head as if to reject my words. “I was friends with Uncle Louis’s—the village chief’s daughter. My father always took me along to Ajole, and we would play together while our parents were talking.”

“Are you referring to Suiren?”

As I remembered the skinny young girl, Lady Renge momentarily gave a big smile. “Yes, I’m talking about Suiren. I’m glad to hear she’s okay.”

“Yes. She was eager to cooperate.”

“Thank you for letting me know. I was worried—I hadn’t heard from her since then.”

In this world, it was only natural to assume that someone had died if you had not heard from them in two years. Life and death were only separated by a thin wall here.

Lady Renge gave a melancholic smile as she repeatedly muttered “Thank the gods.” Then, she said, “I cannot forget her final reply when my father and I tried to persuade her to come to Adele village with us. She said, ‘I can’t abandon the village and the villagers. I’m not like you people.’” In reality, she may have used much harsher words. Lady Renge’s shaking voice indicated that she was on the verge of tears. “That wasn’t my intention—nor my father’s. We just wanted them to recover their strength until it was possible to return to Ajole village. We planned on taking on as many villagers as possible in Adele and requested for the rest to be taken to the city.”

I completely understood that had not been their intention. Both Chief Marco and Lady Renge were far too kind for this world. You may even say they were easy marks. There was really no other way to describe someone willing to support another village that had suffered from bad harvests for twenty years, even after one’s own village had suffered from a disaster.

I assured the worried Lady Renge—who was explaining her motives in rapid succession—that I understood. “Yes, I know you did not want to abandon the village or the villagers.”

“But to think that at this rate people will die in large numbers... Ajole village might really disappear for good,” she said.

“You are right.”

Lady Renge’s kindness spoke for itself. From my point of view, it was in fact the people of Ajole who had abandoned the kindness of Chief Marco and Lady Renge. The latter pair had made every effort to support them by sharing Adele’s commodities. Once Ajole realized that they were no longer going to receive any supplies from Adele, they abandoned their efforts to work together. It was not much different from avoiding paying off your debts.

“You ended up fighting with Suiren precisely because you could not abandon them. The same goes for your father.”

If they had intended to abandon Ajole, they would have just given them some appropriate words of encouragement and left them to their own devices. There was no need to increase the lodgers in their village and further reduce their already diminished food reserves. In an attempt to seek comfort, the people of Ajole must have pitied themselves as a village abandoned by Adele. They were unaware that they were the perpetrator pretending to be the victim. They were a thug swinging the club of the weak.

On the other side of the equation, Lady Renge—who had helped them out in various ways—still felt obliged towards them. It was absurd that she was brought to tears by the violence of that club simply because she found herself in the stronger position as a result of her serious efforts and all her knowledge.

“Okay, bring it on!”

What exactly? I questioned my own statement. As expected, Lady Renge and Lady Maika’s puzzled faces made me uncomfortable.

In an attempt to satisfy their curiosity, I proceeded to answer without much thinking about it. “I do not think it is right that Ajole assumes they were abandoned, even though Adele showed such goodwill and kindness towards them.”

Hey, don’t act before you think, Ash. Didn’t you just learn that on the expedition? That you will run into unsuspected dangers if you don’t think before acting.

“If those people refuse to abandon their village at all costs, how about we

take them by their word?”

My childhood friend immediately perceived the irrationality of my statement. “Oh... Ash’s getting all fired up. And it looks like he’s at his most unhinged.”

That’s right, Maika. And if you noticed, please stop me.

However, my next words came out before Lady Maika even had a chance to open her mouth. “We will draft a plan for Ajole’s restructuring at the Territory Reform Promotion Office. Naturally, the implementation will be unimaginably difficult.”

So much so that it would be better to just abandon the village. It was pure kindness that prevented me from saying that the plan would be impossible to implement. Anyone saying they could rebuild Ajole village must have been completely out of their mind. And I was that person.

“Therefore, this plan will require an almost cruel amount of effort. It will be worse than hell. I will wholeheartedly devote my body and soul to this plan.”

Both of the girls recoiled when they saw my expression. It was unusual to see even Lady Maika being put off by me. Meanwhile, Lady Renge’s face had become pale. How strange. Judging from the tension of my muscles, I was smiling.

“They said they were not going to abandon their village, so let us test their resolution.”

Maika’s Perspective

This is bad. Ash’s getting way too excited. I’ve got to stop him!

At this rate, Ash was going to crash head-on into all kinds of people, just like my mom had predicted. But how was I going to stop him? Eliminate the cause? But the cause was Ajole’s poverty, and solving that issue wasn’t possible anytime soon. Although if anyone could solve it, it was Ash himself...

Shifting his attention to something else? But what would have been intense enough to catch Ash’s eyes at the moment? There didn’t seem to be anything like that in this whole wide world. *This is hard... Let me think.* Oh, how about

gathering advice on restraining Ash from my uncle, Yae, Rihn, and my mom?

If possible, I wanted to help Ajole village too. Even though Suiren had complained a lot, her will was strong enough to withstand Ash's grueling training. Remembering Renge's sad face when she talked about Suiren, I felt my chest tighten, but that was no reason for Ash to—

My legs, which had been moving towards my uncle's office, suddenly came to a halt. The wheels in my head were turning as I pondered the thought that "there was no reason for Ash to suffer for a village like that." Suffering? Ash? From something like that? *Don't be stupid!* I got angry at my own thoughts. Well, it was true that, if we failed, Ash was going to suffer. Since he was always so kind, I was sure that he was going to be distressed if someone died in a village he had set his eyes on.

But what about it? Did I really think that he was going to lose it? My Ash—my crush—wasn't a weak person. He wasn't a spoiled child like me, who didn't want to see anything sad or painful. On the contrary, when he saw something tragic, he made it a challenge to turn that thing into something fun and bright, and that was why I liked him.

I remembered that, when I was a child, I used to hate the setting sun and the evening that followed it. I hated the dark of the night because it was so cold and damp, chilling my body to its core. I was scared of the eerie darkness, void of any light, because it concealed shapeless monsters. Even now, I didn't like the night, but I was no longer as frightened as I used to be back then. The sunset now brought back the memory of Ash taking me by my hand and accompanying me back to my house. The cold of the night now reminded me of the warmth of Ash's hand. And the eerie darkness reflected his smile as he gently pulled my hand. Therefore, I no longer had any reason to be afraid of the night.

Like a fire in the hearth that softens a cold winter night. Like a light that guides me to the safety of my home on a scary night.

As expected from Ash, my ideal man. But I was still weak. Proof of that was the fact that I was now afraid of a different night approaching in front of my eyes—a night called Ajole village. The scenery we had observed during our expedition had been painful. Empty houses, ruined fields, people who shut

themselves inside their homes... It was a gloomy village that reminded me of the ghost towns that appeared in fairy tales.

Amidst all this lived Suiren, whose expression indicated from time to time that there was still some fight left in her. It seemed like she had not yet given up. If she had, she wouldn't have been able to keep up with Ash's lessons. Although there must have been something left worth seeing in Ajole, all the firewood and wax that were supposed to keep the lights burning were just waiting to be swallowed by the darkness. An exceptionally cold and ominous night tried to envelop Ajole village. And then, what was going to happen to the village? And to Suiren? And to Renge, who worried about Suiren with teary eyes?

I didn't want to know. Just thinking about it made my chest hurt. It felt like my heart was strangled, and I had difficulty breathing. Before I realized it, the cold night air I hated so much was also trying to engulf me. I hadn't been able to run away—that's right, I had tried to run away. And I had even come up with the cowardly excuse that I just didn't want Ash, my crush, to suffer. I had convinced myself to look away from a tragedy that was hard to avert. Afraid of the night, I had sought cover inside my room, wrapped up inside my bedsheets, like an immature child. Of course, that was not good enough to escape it. No matter where you were, even if you were flying in the sky, the night would always find you. It engulfed the whole world in a cold darkness, at the heart of which creepy monsters crawled around.

There was no way out. No escape route. So, what could I do? I could light a fire, just like Ash had done. Like the fire that he had given me. I had answered my own question. I knew what to do. I had known all along. I had already learned this lesson! On that dreamlike evening in our village, when my ideal man had grabbed my hand—ever since that day, I had carried that fire within me.

It was hot. Before giving up without doing anything, I decided to struggle. The cold night air ceased—it was bright again. Rather than lamenting that nothing could be done, I should discuss whether something could be done. The darkness was dispelled. Now that my view had been cleared, I could see the back of the red-haired boy. Having seen the starving and suffering villagers, as well as the faces of those who worried about them, he was already running

towards them. He was running forward to light the hearth of anyone freezing, to drive away the scary night with the help of his fire—the flame that had been tirelessly burning bright.

Like a fire in the hearth that softens a cold winter night. Like a light that guides me to the safety of my home on a scary night.

My ideal lover was holding up the flame as I had imagined it. Why on earth had I been standing still even though I had already witnessed it with my own eyes? Had I not come this far by wanting to be with him and trying to reach his back? I needed to properly rekindle my love and support him with all my strength, or else I had no right to proudly proclaim to be in love.

“All right. Let’s do this, Ash!” Alone in the corridor, I put my hand on my chest and swore to the warmth inside of me. “I won’t run away anymore.”

If Ash was going to tackle a painful and difficult problem, I was going to tag along. And if he was going to fail or run into an obstacle and suffer, I was going to be there with him too. As long as I was with Ash, he was going to fill me with bright and happy emotions, but that didn’t mean that I was going to run away from anything sad or painful. I was going to face and conquer it.

This was no doubt going to be a grand and sublime, noble and gorgeous, loud yet quiet, and—more than anything—exciting battle with our lives on the line.

“From here on out, I’ll also put my life on the line!”

My words echoed, expressing my hunch that I had finally caught up with the back of the red-haired boy.





Reviving a village that was on the brink of annihilation was no easy feat. It was no task that you should rush towards on the spur of the moment, following a temporary emotion. Luckily, I had been raised into a person capable of saying sorry, so I was very much capable of withdrawing my statement if I reached the conclusion that I was wrong after carefully reconsidering the matter.

After I had declared to “bring it on,” I had soundly slept, woke up refreshed the next day, washed my face, eaten breakfast, and gone to work at the Territory Reform Promotion Office in a good mood. It was more than enough time to reexamine my rash decision. In the first place, yesterday I had been exhausted from the expedition, so no wonder I had not been thinking clearly. Refreshed, I declared the result of my deliberation to Lady Maika and Lady Renge when I met them again at our workplace.

“Well then, let us draw up the Ajole restructuring plan. I am counting on your help.”

Bring on everything you’ve got. As a result of carefully rethinking the matter, I had just gotten more motivated. Putting aside yesterday’s emotional reaction, the disappearance of a whole village was indeed a great loss. Ajole may only have been one small farming village, but a lot of resources had gone into its development. Moreover, if you included the ones that Adele had desperately shared to support them, it was a massive amount of investment. They were resources that I desperately needed myself—to think that they would go to waste was just unbearable.

I realized this was a dangerous line of thinking. I was like a gambler who became engrossed in the game, attempting to make up for the money they had already lost. *But isn’t it natural to want to regain your losses?* Besides, Ajole village was the perfect spot to carry out a certain plan without interference.

“The restructuring plan will make use of Ajole village as a testing ground for the agricultural development plan.”

Ajole was lacking food and their fields were in a state of extreme neglect. Surely they were not going to refuse our help just because I was going to use them as a testing ground to collect experiment data on agricultural produce

grown with animal-manure compost, which was publicly perceived as a taboo. Or rather, I was not going to let them refuse. If they refused to accept my proposal, I was going to force them to emigrate on the count's authority. And if they opposed the forced emigration, I was going to make them work at our laboratory as a punishment for committing treason by going against the count's orders. Either way, their road led to animal-manure compost.

The villagers themselves would maybe have lots of complaints, but if they starved to death and a plague occurred as a result, the neighboring villages would be the ones affected, especially Adele. Of course, there was also the possibility that the remaining villagers would turn into looters before the majority of them starved to death. Either way, Adele was at risk. In other words, my proposal was surely better than death or being cornered to a point where you resorted to killing and stealing.

For a start, those villagers lacked awareness of their own life's precious value. Once they realized that, I was sure they were capable of producing four or five people's worth of food per person. Anyone who benefited from their work and did not engage in farming themselves could repay their debt by learning new technologies and seeking out new knowledge to create a better tomorrow for civilization.

Farmers were the foundations of civilization. And the sturdier those foundations, the more advanced civilization became. Having them cling to their fields even though they could not even fill their own stomachs was a waste of such an important foundation.

No matter how much I tried to justify myself, before I realized it, my emotions lay bare, exposing me to potential harm from all sides. I felt like there was probably a more efficient way to go about this. However, once I had realized that I could use this opportunity as an excuse to experiment with animal-manure compost, I knew I had to embark on this path.

A rural village that had been slowly tumbling towards its demise had finally reached its limits, but just before it collapsed, it had come across a kindhearted person who wished to save them. That kindhearted person had realized that the farmers were not up to the task, so they held back their tears with a smile.

Anyone who came across a situation like that would have wanted to help them. A kind person should smile out of happiness. And once that thought had crossed my mind, I had become motivated. After all, I preferred a story with a happy ending to harsh reality, even if it was a lie.

“Let me be clear.” In order to stay true to myself, I had no choice but to walk this path. Therefore, I decided to employ all means necessary so that there were going to be no regrets. “I will make sure that the recovery of Ajole village is a success.”

In the process, people may break down crying because they were just not cut out for it. All to save one village. As the saying goes “The road to hell is paved with good intentions.” Surely my resolve to help the villagers was a good enough intention. *Everyone, get ready to charge towards hell.*

After deciding to bestow the honor of spearheading the charge on hell upon Glen, I summoned him at once to explain the situation.

“All in all, Ajole will become a ghost town at this rate. Or to put it more bluntly, there is a high chance that it will get annihilated.”

“I-I see. I don’t want to believe it, but I saw with my own eyes how bad the situation is for Suiren and her fellow villagers... And if you’re saying it, it must be true.” Glen wiped the sweat off his pale face and gave me an imploring gaze. “So...I guess you’re going to do something about it?”

“Yes, I intend to. What made you think so?” *How did he know?*

“I just hoped that you would try and do something for them.” He had wished for me to do something. Seeing that I was going to fulfill that wish, his face regained its color before my eyes. “And you’re not disappointing me!”

“As I said, I intend to. However, it will be extremely difficult, so we need to be resolute.”

He probably should have kept that pale expression for now. The plan had not been drawn up yet, let alone been approved. Regardless, Glen was beaming.

“I wouldn’t expect anything less from you. After all, you’re the Phoenix who’s done nothing but blow everyone away with your actions.”

It felt like he was treating me the same way Lady Maika did. For some reason, I had gained his full trust. I just wished he would stop calling me by that embarrassing nickname. Anyway, the whole thing did not make much sense, but it was better than not being trusted at all. Much more convenient, at least.

“I need your help. The promotion office will draw up the plan and explain it to the administration, but someone will also have to explain things to the villagers of Ajole.”

“Yeah, you can’t just suddenly surprise them with a proposal like that—that would catch Suiren and the others off guard.”

“However, Lady Maika and I will be extremely busy.”

Glen understood what I was getting at. “And that’s why you called me—a soldier who knows the way to Ajole and can easily talk to Suiren and the others.”

Exactly. He was perfect as a messenger to Ajole village. He was capable of traveling alone or with a small party and interacting with the villagers. Moreover, we were talking about a dangerous journey into the remote parts of the region, with the possibility of running into bandits and wild beasts—maybe even demons if you had enough bad luck. As such, the task could not be entrusted to a regular citizen. In this world, messages were usually relayed by the military’s patrol squads. They acted as mailmen who, in exchange for some rewards, delivered messages while carrying out their original missions. In this case, however, it would have taken too much time to wait for their next regular patrol. I wanted to get on with this project as soon as possible.

Peddlers also relayed messages, but most of them tended to stick close to patrol squads. As for the ones who traveled on their own, you still had to take into consideration their stock replenishments and trade dealings, which made them just as inconvenient as the patrol squads. By the way, my good friend Mr. Quid was one of those peddlers who did not rely on the military, because he himself had gone through military training. It appeared that he was quite skilled with the spear. In any case, when it came to a job that needed to be done quickly and involved important negotiations relating to government policies, it was difficult to find a reliable person among those who played postman on the

side.

“This correspondence will not be over after just one or two exchanges. You will have to go back and forth between the city and Ajole many times over. Meaning that it will be dangerous and require a lot of stamina. What do you say, Glen?”

“That way we can save Suiren and the other villagers, right?” Glen did not even flinch in the slightest upon hearing my somewhat intimidating statement. “Just leave it to me. I may not be as smart as you or Maika, but in terms of physical strength I can put up a good fight. I’ll have a go.”

“Thank you.” *Still, let me warn you inside my mind: that was quite a rash answer!*

Glen looked happy on the outside, but relaying messages to Ajole village was quite the exhausting work, one which I definitely would not have wanted to do myself. As the person who spearheaded our charge, he was also destined to be the first to go through hell. Regardless, I had been confident that Glen was going to accept. Especially after he had repeatedly mentioned Lady Suiren!

I did not know any details, but it was clear that he was enjoying his youth. Love often blossomed before you realized it. There was a big difference between wanting to help Lady Suiren and wanting to help Ajole. However, the target was the same, or rather, they were bundled together. In the end, his intentions did not really matter—as long as they lined up with my plan, everything was all right.

“Well, Glen, I will entrust you with relaying the message to Ajole then.”

“Yeah, I’ll take care of it. I won’t fail you. But...can you tell me what exactly I should tell them? I can count on you in that regard, right?”

“Of course.” *I’ll craft a message that the residents of Ajole just can’t object to.*

More precisely, I planned on keeping the use of animal-manure compost a secret for now. I was going to stick to harmless language and drag them into the project by offering an investigation into the cause of their fields’ desolate state and rehabilitation experiments. Then, once there was no going back, I was going to make my move and use the compost for the experiment.

That was not a fraud or a lie—I was in no way trying to deceive them. How could someone like me, who tried to save their village out of the goodness of my heart, possibly have resorted to a treacherous technique like that? It merely seemed like deception because the truth was only going to be explained in small amounts at a time. And it was only natural for the most important part to be postponed, since you had to carefully consider when to bring it up.

After successfully securing the vanguard for our hell invasion operation, I did not have any time to rest as I devoted myself to devising a strategy to coax my next target. The vanguard was a carrier pigeon—I mean, someone carrying out the very important role of messenger. Up next was our sponsor. At any rate, our plan was hopelessly underfunded. If it was not possible to get any money, material resources would be fine too. Actually, resources were more than good enough. After all, money was just a means to obtain said resources, so it would save me quite a bit of trouble. Therefore, resources it was. And by resources I meant food.

Ajole's fields were so ruined that they needed to be recultivated to recover. Naturally, that would halt the production of all crops, so the village needed all the food it could get to survive that period. It was truly inconvenient, but unfortunately, humans could not live without food. If only humans had evolved a bit more conveniently... *Keep at it, Mr. Evolution. I know you can knock down that law of conservation of energy.*

As I cheered on the everlasting evolution, I explained the situation to Lord Itsuki before asking for a favor. "Therefore, I want to carry out a large-scale experiment for the agricultural development plan. What kind of budget can I expect?"

"Wait, wait, wait! You're going too fast," Lord Itsuki stopped my hasty explanation.

Damn, I wasn't able to sweep him up with my momentum. As one would expect from the acting count—he knew when to pause and calmly consider things.

While I was irritated on the inside, I put on a smile on the outside and bowed

my head. “Please forgive me. I got caught up in the heat of the moment.”

“Hm... But you managed to cool down again in an instant?”

You’re just imagining things.

Lord Itsuki made his servants prepare tea and invited me to sit down in the chair reserved for his guests. As he was taking a break with some tea, the acting count held the expedition party’s report in his hand.

“I was surprised when I heard that you had already finished your report only two days after coming back, but I’m even more shocked to see that you have already come up with the next plan.”

“We did our best.”

“That’s just even more baffling.”

By the way, as a result of our efforts, both Lady Maika and Lady Renge were out of action. Before raiding the count’s office, I had washed my face and noticed in my reflection on the water’s surface that I too had pronounced dark circles under my eyes from exhaustion. *As I said, we did our best.*

“Ajole is facing the most serious difficulties—their current fields are not able to sustain the village.”

Lord Itsuki glimpsed at me after reading the report’s summary. “Are you sure it’s fine to carry out a farming experiment in a place like that?”

I could not blame him for worrying. It was not a very promising situation. Still, I had prepared an answer for this.

“It will be fine even if it does not succeed.”

“Oh?”

To put it bluntly, Ajole was a dying village only waiting for its demise. If by some chance the farming experiment ended in a big failure, it would just speed up its inevitable demise by a little bit. On the other hand, if it succeeded the village would be spared and recover. For the territory, it was a profit if it succeeded and nothing was lost if it failed. And either way, we would be able to obtain valuable test data.

“There may be no huge benefits to conducting the experiment in Ajole, but there are fewer disadvantages compared to other places.”

“I see. As always, you’re great at emphasizing the positives.” Impressed, Lord Itsuki stroked his chin before he continued talking about the plan’s implementation. “In regard to the compost trials, our problem was that the people opposed to work with it or sample the food produced as a result. However, it will be hard to refuse for a village that’s as cornered as theirs.” That was part of the plan. A drowning man will clutch at a straw. “There was also hesitation because a failure would lead to a reduced harvest yield, but if the yield is insufficient to begin with, that would be less of a concern.” This took into consideration their crisis management, which sought to reduce inevitable harm as much as possible. “Hm... It does look like Ajole village is the ideal spot if we ever want to conduct experiments on animal-manure compost.”

“Does that mean you will consider a budget?”

“I’ll consider it.” Lord Itsuki took out another document from his desk. “But I don’t have much leeway. This year I need to finance another new trial... Wait, this is another one of your proposals.”

He was referring to the packaged meals proposal. That made it sound like I was a money pit. *Please feed me more money.*

“Do we possess anything that you could turn into money?”

“If there was, I wouldn’t be worrying so much.”

After letting out a strained laugh, Lord Itsuki let go of the documents and sipped his tea. I agreed with him as I also drank my tea.

“If the spirit lamp had been a success, we could have expected some money from Quid,” I said.

“Ah, that. I talked to him and he said it would be good as a curiosity gift. We’ll produce spirit lamps in small quantities and use them as gifts when visiting other places.”

“For social relationships?”

“Yeah. If I send one to my father in the royal capital, I’m sure he’ll make good

use of it. Curiosities like that liven the mood. And it also shows our territory's strength."

"That makes sense. It touts our technological prowess and developmental skills."

I had only thought of the spirit lamps as domestic and commercial goods, but they also exerted silent diplomatic pressure. There are many different ways to look at things in this world.

As I was impressed, Lord Itsuki continued talking with a happy look on his face. "Your model plane left quite the impact on the capital. The whole city trembled in an uproar. Thanks to you, our family, which had been looked down upon as a bunch of provincial hicks, can now be proud. Lately, my father's been in a good mood too." At that point, Lord Itsuki suddenly stopped, as if he had suddenly remembered something. "Come to think of it, I hadn't told you this. When I told my father about establishing the Territory Reform Promotion Office, he seemed excited and gave his blessing as the count."

"That is the first time I have heard this. All this time I thought it was solely due to your recommendation."

"Of course, I also recommended you, but the smooth approval was most likely due to my father—I mean, because His Excellency took a liking to you."

"I am honored. I have to be even more grateful towards everyone who made this possible." *But why didn't you tell me this earlier? If I had known that one of the big shots has taken a liking to me, I could've been much bolder!*

I took this opportunity to learn some more about Lord Itsuki's father, His Excellency the count of Sacula. Similar to Lord Itsuki, he was very well-versed in military affairs. Currently, he had put his son, the next count, in charge of the Sacula region so he could accumulate some experience, while he himself permanently stayed in the royal capital as a diplomat. Furthermore, Lord Arthur was supposed to be his child with his second wife, born after he had moved to the capital. However, that relationship immediately fell apart if you thought about the timeline and ages involved, but no one seemed to dig into the matter. Apparently, sons and daughters whose ages did not make sense with their parent's timeline were quite common among the nobility in the royal

capital. *I bet an infidelity detective agency would make a killing in this world. Especially if you included sharp tools and funeral services as a complimentary service.*

In any case, Lord Itsuki's information regarding the royal capital was very interesting. For example, our count's standing in the kingdom. He said his father was treated as a provincial hick, but the position of count was fairly high-ranking, leaving him with a high family status. He even seemed to carry some royal blood, albeit a distant lineage. Nonetheless, it appeared that all the urban aristocrats who owned land in the vicinity of the royal capital had a jealousy-fueled cynical attitude towards the count. Conversely, the count was popular among other nobles from rural areas, who were also treated as provincial hicks. In other words, he needlessly stood out and became even more of a target for the urban nobility.

"It appears that His Excellency the count has many things to worry about."

"Yeah, the further you live away from the king, the worse you'll be treated in the capital. At the same time, the royal capital can only enjoy its peace because frontier territories like ours have become their walls."

"Arthur always criticized the royal capital for being too conservative."

In her letter, Lord Arthur had written that she missed the liveliness of our territory. The capital did indeed still seem quite conservative.

"By the way, do the people in the royal capital also like novelties like the spirit lamp? It does not seem like they would appreciate those kinds of things," I asked.

"Yeah, it's not popular with the urban nobility—they are too strict. They claim it's not sophisticated enough and the light's too shallow. Still, remember that there are also nobles from rural areas like ours in the capital. Maybe it's some form of backlash towards the urban nobility, but many of them are drawn towards novelties."

This must have been the adventurer or settler ethos that Lord Arthur had referenced. Or maybe they just wanted to know the ways of the world, since they had gone through great pains to engage in social life in the capital. Unlike the capital, where the products of culture automatically showed up, many rural

areas only had access to limited information unless they spoke up. For nobles from those areas, it was much more agreeable to talk to people in the same circumstances than people who ridiculed them for their birthplace, which was out of their control. Moreover, maybe they could even find a solution to their problems by talking to comrades who went through similar hardships. Just like the urban nobility stuck to their own, it was only natural that the rural ones did so too.

“Lately, the Sacula region has been the source of new fads among those rural nobles. His Excellency grumbled in a letter that he has been quite in demand ever since the model plane was revealed to the public.”

It appeared that I had caused my higher-ups some unnecessary extra work.

As I voiced my concern regarding my favorability, Lord Itsuki just laughed it off. “But he’s also been pestering me about news from the Territory Reform Promotion Office, so it’s not all that bad.”

In other words, I had permission to go all out?

“So, are negotiations with those novelty collectors going well?” I asked.

“Yeah, His Excellency seems to be quite eager himself.”

In that case, there was a way to make some money.

“Do you remember when we ordered seaweed from a territory next to the sea? Would it be possible to negotiate with them?” I inquired.

“Oh yes, I remember that. It should be possible. Why?”

“Good, good. And there was also a territory near the mountains famous for its hot springs, right?”

“Indeed. You know your geography.”

Baths were considered a luxury in this world, so I had thought of spending some relaxing time at a hot spring someday. Maybe I could spend a whole month taking baths and just enjoying myself at a hot spring after our trip to hell. Needless to say, I would invite everyone who accompanied me to hell. As I imagined my reward, I became even more motivated. One more reason to do my best.

“Lord Itsuki, would you consider giving up one of our technologies to another territory?”

“A technology?” At that moment, Lord Itsuki’s face became clouded. It appeared to be a delicate subject that soured the mood even among two people as friendly as we were. “It’s true that we’ve developed our technologies thanks to you. Nonetheless, I don’t want to give them up so lightly.”

“I understand your concerns. However, depending on the technology, it might go for a higher price if we sell it now.”

Before long, there were bound to be imitations of the model plane too. After all, copying was easier than creating. Of course, it was unfortunate to lose an advantageous monopoly under such terms. Accordingly, the best method to share it was to generously teach your neighbor in exchange for a technical fee and their goodwill once you had made enough profits from the monopoly. Although the timing would be difficult to pull off.

“But I digress. I was thinking about a technology that currently is not of much use to us. It would probably actually help to sell it to other territories. And we do not have a monopoly on it either.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I have heard that wealthy merchants around the royal capital also have access to the same technology.”

At this point, Lord Itsuki realized what I was talking about. “Ah, you mean soap. Now that you mention it, we used that seaweed for soap-making.”

“Exactly. I ordered the seaweed because it was necessary to make solid soap.”

I had informed him that we were successful in making the soap, but unfortunately, mass production was not possible at this stage.

Lord Itsuki grinned while stroking his chin. Apparently, he did not see any problem with letting go of our soap technology. “You’re right. It won’t cause us any trouble if soap circulates more widely. It will probably actually benefit us, since it will be easier to sell.”

The liquid soap that we were currently developing at the laboratory was

almost ready for private consumption. However, the wealthy merchants constituted an obstacle when it came to delivering goods to the capital. According to rumors, they were annoyingly vicious and colluded with those in power to smash anyone who interfered with their business. Not just financially, but also physically. It was not unusual for well-equipped bandits to suddenly make an appearance. Naturally, even I had to be careful when it came to matters which potentially endangered the territory's public order.

As a result, the soap with the phoenix mark had only circulated in friendly territories in the direct neighborhood. Mr. Quid always lamented that it was a waste of profits to only sell it in such a small area. While I did not lament it myself, I had vowed to one day throw those evil and tyrannical merchants into the valley of sorrow. And now, during my conversation with Lord Itsuki, I had come up with an idea. What if the soap started circulating more widely in other territories too?

The wealthy merchants in the capital would no longer glare at Sacula alone. And no matter how influential they or their backers were, they could not win if they turned all the surrounding territories against them. I imagined soap was going to become popular all over the places where the merchants' influence did not extend. Eventually, their soap monopoly would collapse, and with it their overall influence would weaken.

As a result, Sacula could act freely and start increasing its production and sales of soap. The appearance of a new commodity would lead to an expansion of the market, which in turn would stimulate the economy. Once circulation increased, soap would gradually become more affordable. With an expanded customer base and increased soap diffusion, sanitary conditions would also improve. And better sanitary conditions positively influenced the population's health. And healthy citizens could provide the manpower necessary for an enlarged economy. Apart from the wealthy merchants lying on their backs with their legs outstretched, no one would lose in that vision of the future.

Lord Itsuki and I looked at each other with a grin on our faces. It was a slightly wicked grin.

"Just thinking about it makes me smile, but I suspect there will also be something in it for us if we share our soap manufacturing process, right?"

“You suspect correctly. I think we could expect a lot of gratitude from our neighbors.”

“Sounds good. Very good. I’ll need to broach the subject carefully, but I think it’s worth the trouble.”

Since Lord Itsuki seemed to be completely on board now, I got closer to him. “Well then, Lord Itsuki.”

“Leave it to me.”

What a promising answer! I felt so accomplished that the fatigue from my all-nighters was blown away.

“I will immediately send a letter to my fa—to His Excellency the count. We should target territories with a big enough wallet that are suited for soap production, right?”

“Indeed. If they can get a hold of seaweed, it will be possible for them to make solid soap, which is also easier to carry around for merchants. And I am sure that the soap would be popular with the hot springs’ customers.”

“And of course, you thought of this from the beginning! As expected from you! I’m lucky to have such an intelligent subordinate.”

“Not as lucky as I am to have such a reasonable superior.”

In our excitement, we started to work out the details of the project to distribute the soap manufacturing technology. We mainly racked our brains trying to figure out our desired and minimum requirements to present to His Excellency the count for further negotiations. After we had finished and came back to our senses, the morning sun had risen. In the wake of my third all-nighter in a row, the sun looked as if it had risen straight from hell. However, it looked like I had somehow managed to procure the funds necessary for my project.

First, I had recruited the messenger, then the sponsor, and now it was time to obtain the backbone of the operation—modern machinery. I planned on creating it at the Territory Reform Promotion Office’s laboratory.

As I dropped by our laboratory's very own development room, Lady Reina, the head manager, and Hermes, the head engineer, as well as all the artisan prisoners, who were in charge of the various technologies, were waiting for me.

The table in the development room was covered in delicious-looking food. Serving doubly as a dining hall, the room had a serious yet stylish atmosphere. Although, in reality, it was just a matter of lacking space and making the best out of the situation. However, considering that the laboratory had its start with a single shack, this was quite the upgrade. No one had yet touched the steaming food, so they must have been waiting for me.

"Sorry to keep everyone waiting. Let us discuss while eating." *Don't want to let this feast go to waste.*

I sat down and took a bite. As expected, it was delicious. It tasted even better following a nap after my third all-nighter in a row. Come to think of it, my body here in this world was pretty sturdy—I did not lose any appetite even after an all-nighter. It was perfect for a cruel environment like this. However, while I was eating to my heart's content, no one else seemed to have much of an appetite.

"Is something wrong? I think today's food is exquisite as usual," I said.

Lady Reina replied to my question with a serious glare. "Chief Maika told us that you got started on a big task. Is that why you called us?"

"Yes. This time around it will be a slightly bigger task."

It was our first large-scale experiment, so it also entailed a sudden jump to nightmare difficulty levels. I was not going to say that it would be hard though, because I did not want to lower their morale. I vowed to be a good superior who took his subordinate's morale into consideration. Nevertheless, my considerate statement brought about a ripple of tension, as if someone had thrown a stone into the water. *What's wrong?*

"I-I see. Not unexpected. Is everyone ready?"

Ready for what? Apart from me, everyone looked like they had been told to defend the castle to the death. How could they have suspected me? I had not mentioned a single word about a do-or-die, all-out charge on hell yet!

In an attempt to stifle the shaking and calm the mood, I slowly proclaimed,

“There is no need to be so nervous. I will ask you to do work, but if you do your part as usual, everything will be fine.”

Unfortunately, my best lie was not good enough to deceive a single person.

Lady Reina, who had readily seen through me, slammed the table and stood up. “No way that’s true!”

Wh-What makes you say that?

“It’s not normal under any circumstances for you to stay up all night to discuss matters! Especially after you’ve just come back from an expedition! Everyone’s already realized that this will be a difficult job!”

Hermes also folded his arms and took over from Lady Reina with a distressed look on his face. “You even admitted that it’s a big task. And you’ve never said that about anything before.”

I said a slightly bigger task. The “slightly” was very important here, so it should not be overlooked.

However, he ignored that and continued, “We already considered all the tasks up until now too big for us. If you’re now saying that this is a big one, then I don’t want to imagine what that means for us...” Hermes suddenly started shaking. Shaking with excitement, I imagined. Surely. Probably. Most likely. Without a doubt.

In other words, it seemed like everyone was filled with motivation for the upcoming task. Surely. Probably. Most likely. Without a doubt. Even if my confidence was misplaced, I had no intention of confirming it, so I was never going to find out. Thus, you could say that the laboratory staff’s motivation was present and absent at the same time. *Let’s call it Schrödinger’s motivation.*

In general, motivation was a meager thing. So, if you could say that they were half motivated, that was essentially the same as them being motivated. In other words, they were motivated.

Having come to that conclusion, I stood up and politely bowed. “I would like to express my gratitude and respect for everyone’s resolution. I am proud to be surrounded by such wonderful comrades.”

It felt like everyone looked at me as if they were surprised by the turn the discussion had taken. *Must be my imagination.*

“As long as I have you, I am confident I can lead this slightly bigger task to success whatever problems may arise,” I proclaimed. A slightly bigger task. Just slightly bigger. “Well then, it looks like you are all eager to know what it is, so let me briefly explain the task.”

Lady Reina and Hermes tried saying something, but I managed to keep them in check with a smile. *First, listen to what I’ve got to say. Then you can ask questions later—if there is any time left.*

“I want you to improve our agricultural machinery and equipment. Especially the kind of cultivators that are drawn by cattle and horses.”

Currently, there was an extreme labor shortage in Ajole village. Cultivating those ruined fields with human strength alone was not feasible. Therefore, we needed plows that could be drawn by cattle and horses. Even Noscula had been provided farming horses and machinery when developing the village. Ajole’s rebuilding was essentially the same as setting up a new village, so I wanted them to have the same support. However, the cultivators here were inefficient and primitive tools that broke easily. There was a lot of room for improvement. Since I had not delved too much into that subject myself, I was going to delegate it to our staff at the laboratory.

“Improving our farming equipment... I guess we have to start by looking for references.” Correct answer from the gloomy-looking Lady Reina. “I am going to ask Mother Yae to help out too. Arthur is already cooperating.”

Before she left, I had given Lord Arthur a list of information that I wanted. Her first letter from the capital had been accompanied by a collection of books on farming. Lord Arthur was not just thoughtful but also rich. In my reply, I had expressed my gratitude, excitement, and deep appreciation, and let her know how much I loved her.

“I only skimmed through the books, so I am not sure about the details, but the ones that seemed useful are at the temple library,” I said.

“Knowing that there are books is already helpful, but I wish we had more people who could help...”

It was understandable that Lady Reina had a worried look on her face. The majority of the laboratory's staff were prisoners. While many of them may have learned how to read, they were forbidden from entering the temple. Even the citizens praised them for not looking like former criminals at all, but officially, they were still prisoners. Research unfortunately required a lot of human resources, which they could not provide.

I nodded to reassure Lady Reina. "I will lend you some hands. Anyways, we need to quickly identify what requires improvement, so that we can get started on trials. Otherwise, we will not make it in time for this project."

Lady Reina put a hand on her forehead. She did not seem reassured at all by my helpful proposal. "You're in quite the hurry, aren't you?"

Seeing her troubled face, Hermes apologetically stated his opinion. "Reina, we should get the research done swiftly. We don't want the work that comes afterwards to pile up..."

"I know that it will be worse if the latter half of the project gets backed up. I'll try to cut down the time spent on research as much as possible."

"Thanks. I'll help where I can."

It felt like anything I said right now was just going to make them more anxious. This was the heavy weight of those who gave out orders. While there were good reasons for it, I still made my subordinates go through great trials. It was difficult for a competent superior to also be loved.

On the occasion of such heavy responsibility, I remembered the academy's teachings and firmly provided them with the final piece of information necessary to complete the order. "For the time being, I will give you one month to finish your task."

After I had proclaimed the deadline, everyone stared at me as if they were looking at despair itself. As the person who was paving their way to hell with good intentions, I deplored their treatment of me as the embodiment of a disaster, but only on the inside.

At any rate, I had successfully recruited the backbone of the operation, although its participation was not yet guaranteed. For now, it had entered the

preparation phase, but it was not sure whether the backbone was going to be ready in time for battle. Still, since our laboratory's staff was extremely capable, I was certain that they were going to finish in time. Hermes' new favorite toy, the lathe, was going to come in handy. *Isn't it great, Hermes? You can work with the lathe to your heart's content!*

Now then, it was finally time to recruit the second-in-command. I had already traversed a long, dangerous path, but there was still a long march ahead. Those good intentions were a greedy lot to require even more sacrifices when already countless enemy bodies were scheduled to fall over from dedication.

"Power" was going to be our second-in-command. If you wanted to recultivate the ruined fields, you always needed force. No matter how efficient the farming tools, they were only rubbish if nothing made them move. In other words, "power" in this case referred to motive power.

The only two types of motive power that could be used for the cultivators at this stage were human and animal power, which both relied on muscle strength. I yearned for the convenience of electric, steam, and thermal power. Three more years and I could have provided a steam engine. Without any chemical engineering, we were left with the choice of either human or animal strength, of which the latter was obviously preferable. The gap between pulling power generated by quadruple walking and bipedal walking was overwhelming. Only a human chosen by the gods themselves would have been able to keep up with the animals. There were two possible candidates then: cattle or horses. Which one was the better choice? Cattle excelled as farming companions. Horses were better at pulling heavy objects. All things considered, this time around horses were probably the better choice. They would possibly allow us to save some money.

Our plan required us to carry a large amount of food into Ajole, which in turn required a carriage. And carriages were obviously drawn by horses. Since carriage horses were used to pulling heavy weights, they were a good match to work with cultivators. So, if we temporarily rented these horses to also cultivate the fields on top of transporting food supplies, it would turn out much cheaper than buying our own cattle or horses. Still, they were carriage horses first and

foremost, which meant that they could not stay in the village too long. As such, the cultivation would take place over a very short period whenever they brought in the food supplies. I was not pleased that we would have to split up the process rather than do it all in one go, but it was cheaper this way. “Cheap” was indeed a very important word. At the very least just as important as “money.”

While I had come up with the perfect idea that would lead to a happy ending applauded by everyone, the real question was if anyone would be willing to rent out their horses to us.

“What do you think, Quid?”

“If that is all you need, leave it to me.”

With a friendly smile, Mr. Quid agreed on the spot to a proposal that many people would have met with disapproval. Nothing beat having an old friend like him. Mr. Quid offered me tea while we talked in his splendid office.

“I’ll charge you an appropriate fee and I’ll include a clause for compensation in the case that one of the horses gets seriously injured or dies, but I’ll make sure to give you a nice discount.”

Before I could even say anything, he had already haggled over the price by himself. Surprisingly, this part of my journey to hell was played in easy mode.

“I am happy to hear that, but you do not have to overdo yourself.”

Presently, Mr. Quid and his company had gained much trust not just with me, but with the whole territory. It would be everyone’s loss if he drove himself into ruin by lowering the price too much. I felt like I had carried that same worry towards him ever since we had known each other.

“Thank you for your concern. But don’t worry—I’ll make sure not to end up in the red.”

“In that case, I will gladly accept your gracious offer, but...”

Was he really going to be okay? As I worried by myself, Mr. Quid reassured me with a smile. “I’ll be fine. Lately I’ve been doing steady business with the count’s family, who also introduced me to upper-class customers from

neighboring territories. Even if I ended up making a loss due to damage to my horses, I'd be able to cover the expenses with my profits so far."

"I had heard about your business dealings, but it appears that they have been going even better than I expected."

"Thanks to our fellowship. I can offer articles that no one else carries, so I won't make a deficit that easily."

Mr. Quid's sales of our laboratory's new products were going smoothly. What a reliable and trustworthy business partner.

"But unfortunately, my company is still considered a newcomer due to its rapid growth. Lately, I've been receiving some warnings from more seasoned merchants," he added.

"Understandable, since you have been getting more and bigger customers."

Some guys were trying to hammer down the stick that stuck out. Regardless, Mr. Quid was very calm in his worries.

"Just as I was thinking about the warning from my elders, you arrived with your proposal, which seemed like the perfect opportunity."

"Because it relates to the territory's administration?"

It would allow him to publicly associate his company with the count's family, which would then act as a deterrent, since no one wanted to complain to someone who was close to those in power.

Mr. Quid calmly nodded. "Yes. And from what you told me, it seems like we would be helping people. Now that my company has grown a bit, I also need to start thinking about giving back some of my profits to society."

"Oh?"

It appeared that Mr. Quid was even ready to make some losses in order to be recognized by the public as a benevolent merchant. If he had ties to the ruler and a good public reputation, not even a long-established merchant would be able to coerce him. And if anyone tried, they would most likely lose the fight. Mr. Quid was already thinking like the owner of a large corporation. I was proud seeing how far he had come.

“Therefore, I would love to accept your proposal,” he concluded.

“I also welcome your help. Looks like our interests line up this time.”

We shook hands with a grin on our faces. I already looked forward to working together for many years to come.

“Please let me know how many carriages and how long you will need them once you know. If mine aren’t enough, I’ll arrange something with another company.”

“I appreciate your help. I will let you know the details.”

He was already vying to create debts in his own favor. I could already see him become Sacula’s top merchant ten years from now. Mr. Quid’s shrewdness was a great asset.

At any rate, I had arranged the board so that we could get things rolling as soon as possible. And who was the general in charge of our assault? The general had been sitting comfortably in his seat from the very beginning. While he did not need any convincing, I could not exert any influence on him either. His name was “luck.” Some also called him “fortune,” “fate,” or “destiny,” but either way, there was not much I could do. This general was so influential that he could overturn the whole outcome. He was capable of making a mess entirely on his own. All we mortals could do was to prepare everything else in a way that minimized the general’s influence on the fight. “Man proposes; God disposes,” so to speak. For the rest, maybe we could go pray at the temple if we had some free time. My prayers were going out to Goddess Yuika.

Renge’s Perspective

I remembered her pushing away the hand that I had stretched out. When I’d looked at her crying face, I’d realized that my words had hurt her. “Let’s live together”—that’s what I had told her. I had reached out my hand and asked my childhood friend to leave the village where she had been born to start over in a wealthier place.

“Are you telling me to abandon my village?”

But she pushed away my hand.

“That’s not what I mean, Suiren! Your fields have reached their limits and Adele can no longer support you. Ajole won’t be able to hold out at this rate!”

“But I can’t just abandon this place! I was born here! It’s special to me!”

After that, I’d no longer known what to say. I had angered her. Hurt her. I had made my childhood friend hate me. I’d been scared. I had hated it. I’d no longer been able to speak. I hadn’t wanted to make her any angrier, to hurt her more. I hadn’t wanted her to hate me even more. I hated myself for being such a weak coward. Even though I’d realized that at this rate Suiren might have died, I’d averted my eyes because I didn’t want her to hurt my feelings. I knew that was wrong. Even back then I’d realized it was wrong. But I hadn’t had the courage to get hurt any further, so I’d just abandoned my childhood friend.

Compared to me, Ash was a strong and brave person. When faced with the reality of Ajole village’s condition, he had raised his voice to save them in spite of the fact that there was not much time left. And his voice had echoed all the way to the acting count and the government. If Ash failed, it was undoubtedly going to stain his name and hurt his good reputation with Lord Itsuki. And failure was much more likely than success. Judging from his words, Ash must have known this himself. If I were in his place... My chest hurt just thinking about it. My fingertips became cold. Maybe I was wrong, but I felt like it would have been impossible for me.

“Is Ash...not scared?” I spontaneously asked Lady Maika as I was summarizing Ash’s proposal on an official form.

She was my and Ash’s superior, but even I could tell how much she cared for Ash, and she always seemed to know what her childhood friend was thinking.

“Of course I think he is scared.”

“R-Really?”

Her reply took me by surprise, as I had fully expected her to say that Ash was afraid of nothing.

“Ash is using up so much money and human resources, but he still doesn’t know whether it will succeed. Even someone like him would worry. It must be frightening. No wonder he crammed to put this plan together even though he

was tired,” Lady Maika explained her childhood friend’s motives.

I see. That does make sense. He was able to go the extra mile precisely because he was afraid of failure. I also tended to get work done quickly whenever I didn’t feel at ease. I knew how that felt. But I wondered if he was really scared.

“But...how could he come up with...something like this?”

I grabbed the provisional budget plan from Lord Itsuki. It talked about raising money by enlisting help from His Excellency the count in the capital and roping in other territories. In other words, it was not the sort of budget put in place for a project that was doomed to fail.

“Can he pull this off? It’s scary, isn’t it? Thinking that it might fail and what will happen if it does... Yet he wants to put in motion a huge plan like this?”

“Yes, it’s Ash after all.” Lady Maika’s faint smile showed a hint of consideration. Almost like a mother, or a soldier who moved forward despite an injury. “As someone who comes from a farming village, you must be aware of the many children that died in our generation, right?”

I only managed to nod at her sudden question. The death of children—it was as inevitable as rain in this life.

“Do you remember any of their names?”

“What? Um... I think the ones that died when I turned ten...”

Hearing her inquiry, I started feeling guilty. I was shocked that I barely remembered any of their faces, even though I must have been close to at least some of them. No one was saying the names of the children who had died. As a result, they quickly faded away from everyone’s memories. When their ashes were scattered at the cemetery, they briefly danced in the air before tumbling down on the ground, where they merged into one large pile of nameless casualties.

“Yeah, I can’t remember most of them either. But Ash is different. He remembers all of them. The ones who were our age, the ones younger than us, the infants who had just been born, and even those who didn’t have a name yet.”

I caught my breath at this unexpected information. *Why?* That was my first thought. Why did he remember something with so little meaning that brought so much pain?

“Ash often prayed at our village’s cemetery. Even after we left and came to the city, he continued going to the cemetery to pray. I wonder why. Why does he keep doing it?” Lady Maika shook her head in resignation. She didn’t know why because it was too scary and painful to ask. “But one thing I do know. Ash took those children’s deaths much more to heart than I, who so readily forgot their names. To him, the death of a single person is not just a common occurrence but a major incident. That’s why.” Lady Maika’s words were powerful. “That’s why he’s scared. He’s frightened that the village will collapse and people will die. To him, it’s a major incident. Much scarier than his own failure.”

So that was the reason why. It made sense. I felt like I understood it now. And I sympathized.

“Ash is a very kind person.”

He praised me for being kind, but I could not compare to him, who remembered every single person who died. He was much kinder than I could ever be. Also, he was brave and strong. For someone as kind as him, a failure resulting in the villagers’ deaths would have been much more painful than it could ever be for me. Yet he pressed forward with such a big proposal. If I was a weak coward, he was a strong hero.

“I wish I...”

I wondered if I could ever possess just a fraction, a tiny fraction, of his strength.





Early summer had passed, and it was the height of summer now. Unfortunately, it was a little too late to plant crops for fall harvest, but our plan had finally been approved. At once, I summoned Mr. Quid's horses and their convoy, the patrol squad, to give them heaps of farming equipment and food supplies, which they could carry to Ajole.

After arriving at the village, the residents warmly welcomed us like ghosts from the Buddhist inferno of starvation. I exorcised them with a pile of tomatoes, which were in the process of regaining their status as edible food in Sacula, and opened a path to the fields. *Here I come!*

My only business here was in the fields. Oh yes! If we did not plant the seeds quickly, we were not going to be able to harvest them at all! Ajole's fields were as wild and ruined as ever, but they had been divided by wooden poles stuck in the ground. I had previously ordered Glen to properly mark the boundaries of the different plots. He had reported back to me that Suiren had complained with tears in her eyes that she did not know how to demarcate them. Could Ajole really still be considered a farm village? While I had a natural impulse to solve mysteries, I decided to put this one on the shelf and assign the borrowed carriage horses to veteran soldiers from Sir George's unit.

For the longest time, Sir George's tough guys had managed Sacula's equipment by themselves. That had also included carriages and carriage horses. In other words, they were very skilled at handling horses who pulled cargo. Without delay, I asked them to change the carriage horses' equipment to the work harness for the plow, the new cultivator developed by our laboratory. If you did not do it right, the horse was prone to rage out of discomfort, but the veterans managed to keep them calm and smoothly change the equipment.

Impressed by their performance, I took a bow in front of the horse on whose head Glen and I were supposed to fix the plow. "I look forward to working with you. If you do not feel comfortable at any point, please let me know by making a sound without moving."

"You're so polite even towards a horse."

Glen let out a laugh, but it did not seem like he was making fun of me.

Apparently, he did not think that it was futile to talk to the horse, but rather that I could have been less formal.

“I mean, I cannot pull anything this heavy to cultivate the field.”

“Neither can I...”

“Is it not appropriate then to show respect to those who can do what you cannot?”

“You’re right, but for some reason it feels strange when you’re actually doing it.”

Probably because I’m talking to a horse.

By the way, this plow was going to serve the function of a hoe that turned over the soil. By disposing of the remaining crops and weeds and pushing air into the soil, it prepared the plots for planting new crops. Ajole’s fields were plagued with weeds, so their disposal was a welcomed side effect.

“All right, is everyone ready? Did you remember your safety check?”

Everyone gave an affirmative answer as they stood in a horizontal line in front of me.

“Then let us get started without haste, so that we will not overwork the horses. Neither we nor the horses are used to this kind of work. And remember it is only an experiment, so if there is any trouble, do not fret or panic. Just report it and we can deal with it.”

Once again everyone agreed. They all seemed motivated.

“Then, let us start!”

On my cue, Glen gently pulled the reins, which signaled the horse to start moving. The horse appeared slightly confused by the new equipment, but stepped forward one step at a time. Left and right of us, the other horses followed our example as they were urged by the veteran soldiers pulling their reins. So far, so good. Feeling satisfied, I walked behind the horse and kept my hand on the plow’s handle to adjust its digging depth and direction. Our work had only just started, but all the plows seemed to be effortlessly digging up the soil. The horses also walked nimbly, which indicated that the weight was not

too heavy.

This was the result of our laboratory's great work. A conventional plow would not have worked this efficiently. After we had finished a prototype at the laboratory, we had requested several citizens who owned land in the city's periphery to perform test runs. Among them was an elder gentleman who had used a conventional plow before. He endorsed and praised our new model for being sturdy and easy to handle. That particular gentleman had wistfully looked at our improved plow, saying that given his age it would have made it much easier for him to cultivate more land if he had one of those. I hoped to one day make society affluent enough that anyone as motivated as he could get a hand on good equipment.

During our test runs, we had worked slowly in order not to exhaust the horses, but even so, the difference to manual cultivating was beyond comparison, and no accidents had happened. Although one plow had dropped out due to a part coming loose from vibrations, it had been quickly fixed back into action by retightening that part. The surprised faces of Ajole's residents would have been a great compliment to the laboratory's development team. However, since I had ordered them to develop an even more convenient tool for cultivating, they were still in the middle of development hell.

Once the soil was turned over, we blended the animal-manure compost and the weeds into the soil to nourish the fields. For the time being, the goal was to show the villagers how it was done, so that they could eventually perform the task themselves. It was agricultural coaching. Still, I did not tell them what type of fertilizer it was that we mixed into the soil.

Lady Suiren suddenly asked a question about the compost, which she had never seen. "Say, Ash... What is that?"

"This is a new fertilizer developed by the Territory Reform Promotion Office's laboratory. Unfortunately, the details are classified information. If it leaked to another territory, all our effort would have gone to waste. So please be understanding."

The term "classified information" was extremely convenient for anyone in power. I felt terribly sorry, but since I acted purely out of good intentions rather

than evil ones, everything was fine. Even if there were any problems, they were trivial. In other words, there were no problems at all.

“More importantly, please make sure to remember how to fertilize.”

Since this manure was rich in nutrients, the crops would stop growing if you applied it incorrectly. Moreover, caution was advised due to water-soluble components like nitrogen. Headed by Lady Suiren, the villagers were observing me as I explained these important points while mixing the fertilizer with the soil. All villagers present looked like they sort of understood but not really. It appeared like they all considered it to be someone else’s problem.

No wonder this village had declined this far! They just observed the things in front of them without any self-awareness that it concerned them. Even when their fellow villagers fell over from hunger, and when they received support from the neighboring Adele village, they remained mere spectators who considered themselves incapable of doing anything because of their weakness. That belief that they were helpless bystanders persisted so long as no one questioned it. So far, all the people who had dealt with Ajole had been far too kind, to say the least.

However, I was not going to be so kind. In the end, I was the person who paved the road to hell with good intentions. *I’ll teach them that good intentions don’t always equal kindness.* Hell was a place to judge whether someone’s belief was real or not. I smiled from ear to ear as I thought about my hellish scheme spun out of my good intentions and started explaining our schedule to Lady Suiren and all the others.

Apart from learning how to use the plow and the new fertilizer, I intended to teach them everything—from telling apart useful insects from harmful ones and how to get rid of the latter, to weed removal and the placement of companion plants, to crop illnesses and how to deal with them. The program included everything from the conventional farming methods that Ajole village had lost over the past twenty years to the newest techniques developed at our laboratory.

All this precious knowledge was a result of my many failures. Once someone taught you how to do it, it was easy, but if you had to work it out yourself, it

was incredibly difficult. We had overcome those difficulties through small-scale experiments conducted first at the military academy dormitory's garden, then the land surrounding the prisoner huts, and eventually the fields surrounding the city. Of course, this also included getting our hands dirty doing the actual farm work, laying the groundwork with our collaborators, easing any concerns through careful explanations, investigating our failures, analyzing our successes, and writing it all up in an easily comprehensible report. It was a crystal formed of many people, countless hardships, and much sweat and tears. Although the memories of me kneading the animal dung took up a considerable space in my mind!

“As such, you will learn what is without a doubt the newest and most advanced farming techniques in the entire region. Only a handful of people know of these and even fewer can use them—that is how valuable they are.”

The villagers of Ajole were about to become very valuable human resources. It was a sudden change of reputation and standing from poor peasants to the territory's leading group of farmers.

“Depending on your performance, you may be able to not only secure your own food, but also save all the starving people in the territory.” *Great news! You'll be able to help people!*

Lady Suiren came forward to ask a question while trembling (probably out of excitement). “U-Um... Is something that amazing not wasted on...people like us?”

“Not at all. I even received approval from the acting count Lord Itsuki and His Excellency the count himself for this project. They both are already anticipating the results of your great efforts!”

Overnight, the people who had worried about starving to death had become irreplaceable personnel working officially for the count. What a fortunate turn of events! It appeared that Lady Suiren was also overcome with emotion at this honor, as her eyes welled up with tears. She almost looked like a bullied puppy, but that must have just been my imagination.

“I will carefully teach you as many times as needed, so do not hesitate to ask if you encounter a problem. Any doubts or questions are greatly welcomed!

After all, we do not want to disappoint His Excellency.”

Enjoy your heavy responsibilities among the strong now that you’ve been elevated from your position among the weak! It was no big deal once you got used to it. However, if you did not get used to it, you might end up with a pain in the neck.

Suiren’s Perspective

My stomach hurts. I feel like I can’t breathe and I’m dizzy. Ash was scary after all. Instead of shredding the fields, all this new farming equipment that he had pushed onto us ended up shredding our spirits. *And those surely aren’t going to grow any food, no matter how much you plow them!* I looked like I was about to cry when I gazed at Ash, but his reply was garnished with a big grin.

“Well, you will never know until you try. How about you just give it a go? I will take care of preparing the food while you try it. How does that sound?”

To me that sounded like “If you want food, just do it.” So scary. Ash’s smile was intimidating. It may be hard to believe, but he scared me more than the toughest-looking soldier from the patrol squad. Losing to my fear, I did as I was told and took command of the plow. *How on earth am I supposed to do this? I’ve never done anything like this before...*

I was so anxious that I felt like running away, but I was too scared to even do that, especially given the warning we had received that this was a project officially recognized by the count. If I ran from a big project like that, there was no telling what could happen. At the very least, I would no longer be able to stay within the boundaries of the Sacula territory... And then, it would truly be the end. So I had no choice but to do this.

“A-All right everyone! L-Let’s do this!”

For the time being, I was just going to do what Ash had told me and use the borrowed horse to drag the plow along the field. Taking command meant that I had to go into the field too, right? Ash had also done it, so surely this wasn’t wrong. *Like this? Really? Am I doing it right?* This was the first time that I had interacted with a horse in my life, so I didn’t know how to properly handle it.

Looking to my left and right, my eyes met with one of the villagers, who also seemed unsure of themselves. Thank goodness, I wasn't the only one who felt uncomfortable. We both seemed relieved. Although it was still too soon to be at ease.

"You are doing great. Just keep going like this. Slowly. Stay calm."

Ash was cheering us on from outside the fields. *L-Looks like everything's going fine? Thank goodness. Once you try, this isn't actually too hard. Maybe I can do—Wait, wait! Mr. Horse, don't go so fast! C-Calm down! Stop, go slower! Slower! Sto—whoaaa?!*

"Calm down, Suiren!"

I heard Glen's voice ring inside my ears just when I had closed my eyes in fear of the horse, who had shaken its body while breathing heavily. Glen's large body came running over to me and tightly grasped the horse's reins from atop of my hands.

"Don't worry. Just relax. You don't have to pull so hard."

"But I'm not pulling!"

"You're pulling pretty strongly right now. Yeah, like that. Relax a bit more."

Relax more? Like this? But wasn't I going to fall over if I relaxed more as he said? When I did as Glen had told me, I ended up leaning in his arms. I didn't really know what had happened, but the horse had calmed down. As expected from Glen!

As I felt relieved, Ash said to us from the side, "I am glad you are not hurt, but... Glen, Suiren. I will say this as your supervisor, but could you please take this seriously?"

"I'm not playing around..."

"Repeat that if you can after looking at your position right now."

Glen looked down upon me. I also looked at him and myself. Glen was embracing me with his big arms. It was a bit like in the stories where the knight holds the princess in his arms.

"I do not intend to be vulgar, but it is currently the middle of the day and you

are working, so could you please wait until tonight to continue your little game?”

“I-I’m sorry! I’ll move right away!”

As I hurriedly tried to move away from Glen, I startled the horse, causing yet another uproar.

There was still farm work left even after Ash and his troops had returned to the city.

“H-Hey, are these weeds? Or the so-called companion plants?” I asked one of the villagers while I looked at the green sprout growing on the field. However, they seemed perplexed; they didn’t know themselves. “We were told to pull out all the ones that we didn’t plant ourselves, but I didn’t expect it to be so difficult to tell them apart...”

As I dropped my shoulders in disappointment, one of the villagers looked over my shoulder. “Those are weeds. They are shaped differently from the ones in the sample pictures that Ash showed us.”

“Oh? A-Are you sure?”

“Yeah, they have different leaves than the samples. Um... If I remember correctly, the ones growing over there are the companion ones or whatever they are called.”

Different sprouts were growing in the spot they had singled out.

“Now that you mention it, I somehow remember those...”

Or were they different ones? I wasn’t sure at all... I tried asking other people, but most of them didn’t remember. Still, everyone who did remember seemed to think they were weeds.

“S-So, I will pull out these ones then, right? Everyone, please pay attention. Those ones over there you shouldn’t pull out, but these ones here you should. Make sure to remember, okay? Don’t get it wrong... I’m not really confident myself.”

As I murmured the last sentence, more than half of the people broke out into

awkward laughter. Yeah, they didn't really have much confidence either. *Let's make sure to check up on each other, okay?*

"Um... For now, we will have to keep pulling weeds like this and get rid of any insects on the wheat. That's a lot of work."

Insects were everywhere. No matter how often you drove them away, they kept coming back.

"Say, Suiren, is there any point in doing this?"

I had no idea how to reply to the young villager's question.

"I'm not the right person to answer that."

Honestly, I also thought that all this was meaningless, but according to Glen, Ash had gone through great efforts to come up with this method. He had taught himself what we were now going through great efforts to learn from him. He hadn't resigned himself saying that "nothing could be done," even though he hadn't been born into any special circumstances like Maika.

"I don't know whether there's a point to all this, but let's just try it for now." At the very least, Ash hadn't given up and found meaning for himself. "Besides, do you want to disobey Ash, who is here on orders from the count?"

Everyone turned away their faces in response to my question. *Ash's scary, isn't he?* With a big smile, he had proclaimed that "Those who work hard in the fields are entitled to eat lots of food." At first, I hadn't really understood, but what he meant was essentially that "Whoever doesn't work properly doesn't get any food." I had noticed once he talked in detail about eradicating theft and the punishments reserved for thieves. His words were that "If you take more than allowed without permission, this will be how we deal with you." *Thank you for the very polite warning, Ash...*

The villagers and I exchanged glances and nodded in agreement. We had to obtain our food through our own efforts.

The food distribution was just as exhausting as the field work. I had been told to inspect our food storage whenever Glen came to visit. Personally, I thought there was no need to diligently inspect it as long as we stuck to the plan, but

those were Ash's orders, and I could have never gone against his orders! So, out of fear, I did as I was told and...

"Wait. This doesn't add up."

Glen arrived while I was busy recounting for the second and third time, thinking I must've made a mistake.

"Suiren, how's it going?"

"Terribly busy as usual!"

Things were going terribly busy every day since Ash's visit, so this had been my go-to reply. I was happy to hear Glen encourage me by saying that I seemed to be doing all right.

"The thing is, I just counted the food supplies from the storage, and they don't add up..."

"Huh? Which ones? Let me count too."

"Thanks. I've counted them several times, but it's always the same... Maybe I'm overlooking something?"

Together with Glen I counted once again, but as expected, they didn't add up. There were fewer food supplies than there should have been in the storage.

"Did I mess up the distribution?!"

Ash was going to get mad at me for messing up his plan! I turned pale imagining his reaction.

"Calm down, Suiren. Maybe someone had a reason for taking more than allotted."

"But I don't remember anyone like that..."

"Come on, let's ask the villagers if they know something."

Glen proceeded to take me to the field to talk to the villagers. As we appeared in the fields, I felt several stinging looks in our direction. Recently, those who received less food had been staring at me all the time, so I immediately knew who they were. But what was the point of glaring at me? I was just following Ash's order to adjust the shares according to everyone's field work

accomplishments... While I protested on the inside, I still ended up flinching at their harsh looks. My stomach hurt.

As I held my stomach, Glen raised his eyebrow. “Don’t you think the atmosphere’s a bit uncomfortable?”

“Yeah, a bit... Because of Ash’s orders, the food distribution hasn’t been equal.”

“Still, everyone has been receiving their fixed amount, right? From what I heard, those who worked hard just received a little more as a reward.”

I agreed with Glen, but those people weren’t satisfied. Regardless, now wasn’t the time for that. I needed to find out why the food reserves didn’t add up.

“Everyone, please listen! Did someone take food out of the storage outside of food-distribution hours?”

Hearing my question, all the villagers looked in the same direction, where a group of villagers averted their eyes.

“It looks like something happened.”

The group of people who had averted their eyes were the same ones who had been glaring at me just earlier. There were quite a few—or I should say a lot of—problems with that group.

One of them spoke up. “We had permission.”

What? Who had given them permission? I hadn’t. Or rather, I’d been busy distributing the amount indicated by Ash, so I couldn’t have possibly responded to any exceptions or special demands from the villagers.

“The village chief gave us permission. We just took what he allowed us. Surely that’s not a problem.”

“My father? You can’t do that. I’ve been left in charge of the food storage, so it’s all up to me. Moreover, it’s Ash’s plan, so my father doesn’t have anything to do with it.”

“Who cares about that guy’s plan?! If the chief says it’s okay, then it’s okay!”

“L-Like I said, my father doesn’t know about Ash’s plan, so he can’t give you —”

“I don’t trust that little devil! We’re the only ones that get less food! He’s just using us as scapegoats because there’s not enough to go around!”

They’re slandering Ash?! How terrible! He may have been younger than me, but he was so distinguished that he had been appointed to his position by the count of Sacula! According to Glen, Ash was talking directly to the acting count and they even regularly had dinner together! I couldn’t believe how trusted he was!

While my face had turned completely pale, next to me Glen’s face was glowing red. This was the first time that I had seen him angry. “Did you just call Ash a devil?” he said.

No wonder he was angry. Glen always looked so happy when talking about Ash. He always boasted about his former classmate with a grin on his face. Glen’s large body looked like it was going to explode at any moment after they had made fun of Ash, his pride and joy.

“Adjutant Ash is the only person left willing to help this village.”

Overpowered by Glen’s boiling anger, the villagers retreated. Glen may have been big in stature, but he wasn’t violent at all. He was the kindest man I had ever met. Still, it appeared that even he could get angry when it wasn’t about him, but about someone else for whom he cared.

It reminded me of my past. The first time my quiet and timid childhood friend had gotten angry wasn’t for her own sake either... I could almost see her small silhouette reflected on Glen’s tall back.

“B-But the chief’s word is law. We don’t take orders from an outsider.”

“The chief doesn’t have a right to those food supplies—Ash does. And he delegated that right to Suiren.”

Ash had provided us with the food as part of his job at the Territory Something Office. I knew who those food supplies belonged to, but the villagers didn’t seem to fully understand what Glen was saying.

Glen also appeared to realize the villagers' confusion and he let out a sigh before looking at me. Even though he was angry, he was still kind. He didn't resort to any insults, let alone violence.

"I will report this to my superior and make sure that no one will give out any unofficial orders, including the village chief. And regarding the food that is lacking now, I will try to get a replacement, but..."

"Thanks, Glen. We are counting on you."

I imagined getting a replacement was going to be quite difficult... My gaze wandered towards our village's fields. Day after day, I poured my blood, sweat, and tears into those fields alongside the villagers, but the wheat still wasn't ready for harvest. Of course, it wasn't going to be ready before fall, but it seemed unfair that there were no crops even after all this work. And the food supplies also originated from someone who had had to put up with that same unfairness. It wasn't easy to obtain food—not at all.

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The summer sun had grown weaker, and you could see the wind blow over the golden fields from atop the city walls. I was stuck to my desk processing documents while listening to Glen's report. According to Glen, who had just returned from Ajole village, the ripening of their crops was behind the rest of the territory. They were still a long way away from harvest.

"So that's the situation. A number of villagers have been complaining that the crops aren't growing even though it's fall." My weary eyes looked up from the report that I was writing for Lord Itsuki. "Have you been measuring the crop sizes?"

"Yes, as you instructed."

"Are they within the estimated range?"

"Yes, everything's as it should be."

"Then I do not see any problem."

My gaze wandered back to the documents. Since the crops had been planted fairly late in the season, it was only natural that they were not growing as fast

as others that had been planted at the optimal time. Harvest would have to wait until late fall or early winter. Unless there was going to be an unusual cold wave, this territory's temperatures would not pose any problems to a late harvest. There was no need for any further measures—everything had been explained.

“But Ash, it's quite a big problem.”

Hearing Glen's troublesome statement, I stopped writing.

“Has there been an armed uprising?”

“N-No, of course not... Some of the villagers have been complaining and neglecting their work.”

The problem was not big at all. I would not even consider it a problem.

“It is only natural that some villagers react in such a way. That is why I gave instructions to increase the food supplies for those who work more and harder than others. Those who lack motivation do not lose out, but they also do not gain anything extra. Is that not working?”

“Suiren is doing her best to follow your instructions, but... She seems quite distressed from all their complaints and grievances.”

It was indeed not a fun job. She played a thankless role where she was hated even though she did not do anything wrong. Moreover, she was dealing with chronic complainers. But that was her current role, and she was the only one who could fulfill it at present.

“Besides, Suiren has to give instruction in the fields daily. Isn't that a bit too much responsibility for her?” Glen asked.

“Yes, it is not an easy task. There is no doubt that it is a heavy responsibility.”

“So you agree? Can't you help her?”

“I see. That is what you wanted to say, right?” *Got it.* “There is no need to help her. If that is all you have to report, you can go rest for a while now. I will not be able to do anything until Ajole is ready to harvest.”

Even if Ajole was not ready yet, other places were in the middle of harvesting season. All the farmers were busy and, as a result, so was everyone that worked

with them. Personally, I was extremely busy. If the villagers were just discontent and grumbling, then I would have to leave that to Suiren.

“Hey, Ash.”

“Yes, is there something else?”

Glen wanted to continue our talk, but I did not look up from my documents. I had to finish these ones quickly and bring them to Lord Itsuki. Our future budget depended on them. Since Lady Maika and Lady Renge were also busy summarizing documents like these or going out to negotiate, we did not even have any time to leisurely drink tea while exchanging our opinions. At last the Territory Reform Promotion Office had also entered the first circle of hell.

Glen, who was one of my fellows here in hell, hit the desk and raised his voice. “Not something else! Are you saying you won’t help Suiren?”

Lady Maika and Lady Renge, who had been working on some documents, paused in surprise. What a heavy blow to break the concentration of two such talented people. It appeared that Glen was even more devoted to Lady Suiren than anticipated.

I sighed in resignation and gave a strained smile. “Were you not able to save her yourself, Glen?”

“M-Me?” Glen was taken by surprise. “Well, I’m asking you because I can’t do anything.”

“Yeah, it is important to recognize when you cannot do anything and seek help from others.” Or else you ended up stressing yourself to death. “But are you sure you could not have done anything for Suiren? When I taught her, I made sure to teach you too whenever possible.”

I had mainly deployed Glen for diplomatic relations and to ease Lady Suiren’s tension, but he also should have been perfectly capable of helping her if he wanted. And even if he did not have the knowledge to help her, he could have still taken on the complaints in her place or stared the opposing villagers down until they fell silent. At the very least, he was in a position where he could reduce the burden resting on Lady Suiren’s shoulders.

“You’re right... But I was also working as the messenger...”

“As far as I can tell from your report today, there was no urgent message. Could you not have come up with a reason to stay behind? Like you were not feeling well or one of the horses had collapsed?” I continued talking in a polite manner to Glen, whose voice had become quieter now. “What about asking for permission to go back now? I wonder what reason you could use to stay there. Have you thought about it?”

In response to my question, a mixture of anger and embarrassment showed on Glen’s face, as if someone had just poured a bucket of cold water over him. I must have struck a nerve. Glen seemed very depressed.

“You’re right. I could’ve done something before asking you. You taught me so much and yet I didn’t even think about doing any of it. I’m really sorry.” Glen really showed his good side by not sulking here.

“You seem honest, so apology accepted. Besides, you are probably the most frustrated with yourself.”

“Thanks. I’ll keep doing my best.”

“I am counting on it. I know I can expect great things from you.”

After expressing my high hopes for Glen’s future, I returned to the problem of Ajole village and more specifically of Lady Suiren.

“So you are worried because it looks like Suiren is having a hard time.”

“I want to calm down and consider what I can do. I mean, I want to help her too.”

Glen truly looked like a young man as he very sincerely nodded. Or rather I shall say a young man in love. How charming. Lady Maika and Lady Renge also looked at him with a warm gaze.

“That is very kind of you. However, Glen, would that really be helpful to Suiren?” I asked.

“Well, of course it will be helpful to her if I aid her.” Glen scratched his head as he gave a perfectly logical reply.

“Unfortunately, it is the harsh reality of the world that things do not always turn out as you expect.”

Within the system called reality, subset phenomena did not only have far too great a degree of freedom, but also countless random variables. Even if you took an action that seemed to be perfectly normal, it was quite likely that you would end up with an entirely unexpected result.

Given that premise, I presented the following topic of discussion to Glen.
“When helping someone, how much should you assist them?”

Let’s consider the example of a child who has fallen over. The child had been casually walking when they fell over. It did not appear like the child had been hurt. They were crying, but most likely because of the shock rather than any actual pain. Now, as an adult, should you run towards the child and help them up?

“I think so, yeah. Even if the child isn’t hurt, they are still crying,” Glen answered.

“That is a natural reaction.”

There was even a proverb that said that “Even the worst villain would save a child at once.” Glen’s response was common sense.

“But would you help the child up every time they fell over? The scenario may not be realistic, but let us assume that there is a child who is always helped up by someone whenever they fall over.”

“That child must have been surrounded by a lot of kind people,” Glen murmured enviously.

Indeed, they must have lived in a world enwrapped in a silky cloud of kindness.

“A child surrounded by that much kindness would never experience having to get up by themselves,” I said.

“...Right.”

A sour look came over Glen’s face. He must have sensed something disquieting about my words. And he was right—I was going to tease him with my next hypothesis.

“Let us assume then that the child has grown up and falls over in a place

where no one else is around. Now, will they be able to stand up on their own?”

Glen let out a moan after guessing what I was trying to say. At the same time, Lady Maika and Lady Renge, who had been observing us, raised their voices too.

Glen stood there, moaning towards the ceiling for a while, before he scratched his head and replied, “I realize you cannot say with certainty that they will stand up on their own just because they’ve grown up. At the very least, it will be much more difficult for them than for any other normal person who had to stand up on their own before.”

“Precisely. In this case, the aid they received robbed the child of their opportunity to grow up.”

Helping another person was in fact very difficult. This may have been an extreme parable, but stuff like this happened without anyone realizing it. For example, let us consider a fresh recruit not used to their work yet. One of their seniors may not be able to just watch him struggle, so they offer to do the work in their place. The recruit would probably be grateful, and the work would get done much faster, but next time around, the recruit would still be unfamiliar with that task. In the long run, it would be better to not help them. And if you still wanted to help, you would have to come up with a way of teaching them how to do the task.

But that was not all. What I really wanted to say was the following: “If the child just does not know how to get up, then it is not that big of a problem. They just need to train themselves going forward.”

“They would struggle, but you’re right.”

“The biggest problem is if the child assumes it is natural to always receive help.”

In that case, the person would not just struggle, but they would inconvenience their surroundings. You could say that they had gone through life without having to do anything by themselves. Since they never struggled to return the favors they received, they were insensitive to the struggles of others. And as soon as they found themselves in any trouble, they relied on others. Moreover, if no one helped them, they lost their temper, labeling the others heartless and cold-blooded for not helping them.

As I showed the unfinished document to Glen, he awkwardly nodded.
“Sounds like me just earlier. You seem to be quite busy yourself.”

Indeed. Right now, I did not have much time—or rather, I had almost no free time at hand. However, thinking ahead, I considered it important to properly talk to Glen in this instance, so I had paused my paperwork.

“To a greater or lesser extent, everyone is like that. Even I rely quite a lot on everyone else here.”

In that regard, I really was not in any position to call others out. Once things had calmed down, I should make sure to properly show my gratitude towards everyone at the Territory Reform Promotion Office.

“In any case, those are the dangers of helping other people. Now circling back to Ajole... Those villagers really seem to take it for granted that others should help them.”

That was also the origin of my hell-charge plan. Lady Renge had told me about Lady Suiren’s deeds.

“Adele had provided a not-insubstantial amount of the food that helped Ajole stave off starvation. Without Adele’s help, their village would have already disappeared a long time ago.”

Adele had even gone further in their efforts and proposed to take in the villagers to look after them. A deadly knockout blow of good intentions that should have moved anyone to drown themselves in their own tears.

“Still, Suiren said that those kind people ‘abandoned Ajole village.’”

She would not have said anything like that if she had realized how precious each grain of wheat from Adele had been.

“Ajole village has been lucky so far. While they suffered from crop failure for the past twenty years, they still had Adele’s support. And after their support had come to an end, they were chosen as a trial site for farming experiments, which meant they received government assistance.”

It truly was a miracle. A miracle that had descended upon this world, where it was not rare for a whole territory to be destroyed, let alone a remote village.

And it was not divine intervention, but rather the results of human effort.

“But do you think their luck will last forever?” I asked.

Glen shook his head.

Indeed. Anyone who expected their luck to continue was neither an idealist nor a dreamer, but delusional.

“This will be the last chance for the residents of Ajole to learn how to pull themselves up. At the very least, I do not intend to reach out to them a second time.”

If anything, I planned on delivering the final blow myself. Even if the people ended up calling me the villain or fearing me as the devil, I could not allow any further resources to be wasted. Those resources could have also helped prevent others from starving to death. If Ajole village was not capable of proving to me that it was worth investing in them, I was going to boil with rage.

“Therefore, I want you to help Suiren after careful consideration.”

Who do you want to save? And when do you consider them saved? Those were difficult questions. And there was not just a single answer.

Here was another word of wisdom for the stray sheep that I remembered from somewhere. “According to the saying, ‘Kindness is not the same as love.’ If you really care about someone, it can be an expression of love to be tough on them from time to time.”

“I think I somewhat get what you’re saying.” Glen nodded with a serious expression.

Still, it appeared that the two girls in the room were even more impressed than he was. They must have appreciated my talk about love.

Suiren’s Perspective

The late fall wind blew over Ajole’s fields. It tickled my heart each time I saw the golden grain sway in the wind. It was ripe—the wheat was ready to harvest. Ajole village’s wheat fields were painted in gold!

That alone made me so happy I wanted to break into song. After all, it was all ours. With a splendid wheat field like this, we would have more food this winter. I wanted to show it to Ash. I did no longer need to worry that he was going to get angry. His Excellency the count and the acting count should also be pleased with this outcome. Maybe we were even going to receive praise.

As I was waiting lost in my thoughts, Ash finally arrived.

“Sorry you had to wait this long, Ash! I assume you’ve come to inspect the fields!” I welcomed him.

“Yes, that is the plan, Suiren.”

Ash had a curious look on his face. Behind him, Glen also tilted his head to the side. Come to think of it, this may have been the first time that I welcomed Ash so cheerfully. But I couldn’t help it! Our ruined fields had become this beautiful!

“Let’s go and have a look right away then! I want you to see!”

“Sounds good. That way we can get started harvesting right away too.”

Ash looked slightly tired when he nodded. Since Glen looked the same, I imagined the trip from the city must have been exhausting. But once they had seen the fields, they would liven up again!

“Here we are! Take a look, Ash!” My voice naturally bounced.

Ash squinted and observed the wheat swaying with a rustling sound to the movements of the wind. He then murmured some words. “Hm. Better than expected.”

“Right! I’ve never seen a field like this! I’m floored!”

In an instant, all the struggles in the fields, the troubles with the food distribution, and the snide comments from some of the villagers were blown away. All thanks to Ash, who—Wait, those things only happened because of Ash’s plan in the first place. Either way, I graciously bowed my head.

“Thank you! This is all thanks to you!”

“You do not need to thank me. The farming techniques were all developed by our laboratory team, and I was only able to provide you with food in the meantime due to His Excellency the count’s approval of the budget. Everyone at

the Promotion Office helped to put this plan into motion.” Ash was very calm and humble. “Now then, should we take a look at the problems with this harvest?”

My excitement was cut short. Problems? What problems were there? My eyes were wide open in surprise. Ash ignored me and the other villagers as he walked towards some wheat that had grown poorly.

“This looks like... Yes, the seed was not sown properly. If you do not plant it with enough space left for each plant to grow, they get in each other’s way and do not grow as desired. This is why you cannot cut corners when it comes to seed sowing.”

While we still stood there dumbfounded, Ash suddenly started explaining. This was no good. If we didn’t listen carefully to Ash’s explanations, we were the ones who would end up getting into trouble later.

As we rushed over to him out of habit, he acknowledged us with a nod before continuing to explain. “When planting seeds, spots like this cannot be avoided entirely. As long as you know that you need to pay attention, that is more than enough. And if you notice that they are crowded together once they start sprouting, you can take care of it by thinning out some crops. Please keep that in mind.”

Ash smiled while talking, but it didn’t feel like a smile to me.

“Then over here,” he continued. “This looks like some fertilizer-related trouble. These leaves have some compost burn from before they were even ripe. Most likely, too much compost was concentrated in this one spot.”

Wait, is he...? I exchange glances with the villagers around me.

“I already mentioned this when I taught you how to fertilize, but it is important to get the right balance with compost. It may be difficult, but you should aim to equally apply the proper quantity. If you are not sure, it is better to use less, since that will reduce the damage. Please feel free to ask me again next time if you still feel unsure in regard to fertilizing. Of course, you can also ask your fellow villagers.”

Yeah, no doubt. He was lecturing us on our mistakes. “This is bad.” “This too.”

“Pull yourselves together.” He was lecturing us politely but thoroughly.

“U-Um, Ash... Did you by any chance know about these problems in advance...?”

I realized my voice was shaking. Not because I was nervous or scared. No, I was angry. I was unable to keep my emotions under control. *I mean... I mean, if you knew about our mistakes why didn't you tell us sooner? We could have increased our harvest even more and made it easier to get through winter!*

“Yes, for the most part, I noticed the irregularities that were visible in advance.”

My jaw dropped. Even after listening to my unabashed anger, Ash still continued his explanations with a smile.

“Here too. This soil has been a little too hard even before planting the seeds. You have to break it a bit more or it is too hard to grow weeds.”

“B-Before planting the seeds? Why didn't you say anything?”

“Yes, if I had told you, you may have been able to increase your yield by a little.”

We needed that increased yield! I couldn't believe that we didn't get the best result even though we worked so, so hard. I refused to admit it. I didn't want to accept it. But the well-fed people from the city didn't seem to understand.

“Still, if I had told you, you would not have been able to see so clearly for yourself what happens when you make a mistake.”

Ash gently stroked a short wheat straw. Why? He seemed even more polite towards the wheat than me.

“You can afford some crop failure to teach you what happens when you fail. Since it is a farming experiment, His Excellency the count will continue to supply you with food.”

“That may be so, but... That doesn't mean it's enough!”

I felt the corners of my eyes lift upwards and my gaze turn as sharp as an arrow. The villagers surrounding me started pitching forward too. We had worked hard. So hard that we loathed anyone who made fun of us. It was

frustrating.

“In other words, you cannot afford to waste a single grain of wheat right now,” he said.

“Of course! We can’t live without food, and we are desperate to survive!”

Ash’s elated smile was aggravating. He was making fun of me just because I was a hick.

“Then could you please just as desperately do the farm work next time?”

Ash had clenched his fists and released a flame of rage towards all of us who had been throwing punches. All this with a radiant smile on his face. His voice wasn’t rough either, but it was intense. You could almost feel the anger coming from his eyes staring at us. His eyes must have been hotter than the charcoal of any stove. No doubt the other villagers were feeling the same. Our punches were no match for his burning stare of death.

“Since you are desperate to survive, I assume you will be working with knowledge that the same mistakes might really lead to death.”

He was serious. He would burn us to death if we made the same mistakes again. That was what he meant. My whole body, which had been exploding with anger, now felt as if it was being burned down to the bone. I felt like I couldn’t breathe properly anymore. W-Wait. This... This was weird, right? Why were we made to feel like criminals? Why did Ash look like an executioner?

“Um... We just thought...you didn’t tell us...so...”

My voice was shaking. Not in anger, but in fear and nervousness. Or you may even say terror.

“Were you angry at yourselves because you did not manage to achieve a perfect wheat harvest?” Ash’s words clutched my heart. I couldn’t even shut my eyes and ignore it. “I did tell you that it could end up like this when I taught you how to sow the seeds and how to check the leaves’ condition. But I imagine this has been engraved in your memories as an example of a failure after carefully observing the situation and experiencing the pain of a reduced yield.”

He was telling us that it was our oversight. He declared that it wasn’t an

unavoidable blunder and did not say that “Nothing could have been done.” That was Ash’s attitude. Words he could say precisely because he was Ash. His plain words were engulfed by a hellfire. This was the passion of someone who didn’t care about his birthplace or upbringing and had done everything he could to achieve his goals.

It was such a stark contrast to me, who had run away from my responsibilities with the excuse that “Nothing could be done.” My passion didn’t even come close to his. I would have never been able to conjure up this much anger or such an intent to kill. He was truly ready to stake his life for every action he took and every word he spoke.

Paper Is Hotter Than Flames

The wind blowing in through the window was filled with a faint but sweet scent. It was the fragrance of spring flowers competing to attract the insects that had woken up for pollination. Winter had already passed. While listening to the wind's hearsay, I realized that I had been asleep.

"Oops... When did I..."

Lifting my head, I saw a stack of papers lying on my office desk. Apparently, I had fallen asleep while doing work at the Promotion Office. The desk looked rather organized, so I must have used my last willpower before falling asleep to properly put aside my work. I was glad I had not ruined any of the documents with my drool.

"What a blunder to fall asleep at my desk..."

I had to sleep in the bed if I wanted to properly restore my energy. This way my work efficiency was only going to decrease. I stood up and keenly felt the price for sleeping in such an unnatural position as parts of my body cracked.

"Hey, it's Ash!" Lady Maika made an early morning appearance at the office.

"Are you already working?"

"No, I just woke up."

As I scratched my head, Lady Maika realized my disgraceful behavior and puffed up her cheeks.

"Again! What if you catch a cold? You work too much!"

"Please forgive me. I didn't mean to sleep here either."

"No, I can't let this slide! Several people told me to keep an eye on you!"

"Several people?"

"Like Arthur!"

I wondered how close they were for Lord Arthur's name to come up before

her parents’.

“All right. I got it. I will take care, okay?” Overwhelmed by Lady Maika, who had come closer to rebuke me for my unhealthy habits, I put on a wry smile.

“Ah! Th-That smile again! I won’t let you fool me again!”

I was not sure what my smile looked like, but Lady Maika had flinched.

“No good?”

“Nope.”

Her voice had become softer. This was my chance. Without a moment’s delay, I put on my saddest face and dropped my shoulders.

“I know that fake expression. You can’t deceive me anymore,” she said.

It didn’t even take a second for her to expose me. As expected from my childhood friend.

As a punishment for my cheap trick, Lady Maika’s scolding powered up. “Ash! I’m saying this for your sake!”

“I am sorry. I will not do it again...”

“You always say that but then go on to do something reckless! It’s been like that ever since you got lost in the forest!”

This led to a five-minute-long lecture from Lady Maika. A scolding like that was exhausting, but Lady Maika demonstrated her advanced people skills by bringing me breakfast immediately afterwards. She knew how to balance reward and punishment. Just like the dormitory knew how to balance their delicious breakfasts.

“Thank you, Maika.”

“You should thank Chef Yacoo. He was the one who generously shared it when I asked him if there was any left.”

“You are right, but...” I smiled at Lady Maika while stuffing my cheeks with smoked pork. “I am happy you worried about me.”

“Y-You’re happy? B-Because I worry?”

It was pleasant to know that someone worried about you. Just like with my goddess, Yuika. Although I would have preferred the scolding to be a bit shorter.

Lady Maika sat silent with an embarrassed look on her face, but by the time I had finished breakfast, she was back to her usual lively self.

“Are you really doing okay, Ash? You’ve been working nonstop since fall harvest.”

“I think I am doing fine. I am aware that I am tired, but I am also making sure to take breaks in order not to harm my health.” *Like right now.* I was relaxing with a cup of tea after my meal.

“You do seem to have a strong constitution. Even back at the village, you never caught a cold...” She did not try to hide her deep worries as she stared at my face to check my complexion. “Mmh... You’ve got big dark circles under your eyes. Makes you look a bit scary...”

“Yes, I am definitely lacking sleep. Especially this morning.”

“You’ve got to sleep properly!”

“I know. If I do not get a good night’s sleep today, my work will suffer.”

Lady Maika made me promise to sleep well tonight. Did I really look that bad?

While I was stroking my own cheeks, Lady Maika murmured to herself with a serious look on her face. “He looks better refreshed...”

“What did you say?”

“O-Oh! Nothing!”

Are you sure? I considered pointing out any breach of etiquette in a coworker’s appearance an act of kindness. Anyway, it appeared that girls her age considered dark circles under the eyes unsightly. I needed to make sure to get enough sleep.

While taking a sip from my tea, I picked up some documents from my desk. It was the laboratory’s report. Following the plow, new animal-powered farming tools had been completed.

“It looks like the harrow and the drill seeder have been completed. Both are still prototypes, but seem to work properly so far. I plan on using them in Ajole to find out any unknown problems.”

Our laboratory team was really outstanding.

“Oh, right. So it will be easier to sow seeds next time?”

“Yes, I think we can aim to plant enough seeds to make the village self-sufficient with this year’s fall harvest.”

That way they could get back on track for the time being. It was still going to take several years until the situation stabilized, but the burden would become much lighter if they no longer needed to rely on food aid. At the very least, it would no longer be necessary to look after them this closely. They had to endure this pain only a little longer.

“Say, Ash, why are we doing this in Ajole?” I reflexively stiffened when hearing her question the basics of my plan. “It would’ve been possible to do this in another village too, right? Like Noscula. The villagers would’ve been more cooperative, and we wouldn’t have had to provide as much food.”

“Yes, indeed.”

She was quite right. It would not have been just possible, but actually easier to conduct the experiment in another village.

“Of course, I haven’t forgotten what you said at the start. That Ajole didn’t properly appreciate Adele village and Renge’s support. I can imagine that made you angry. It irritates me too.” She puffed up her cheeks. “But I didn’t think that alone would’ve made you put in place a difficult plan like this. It’s not like you to act just because you feel a little irritated.”

“Is it not?”

I felt like I was living in the moment and acting upon impulses in this world. After all, I was so simple that I started to get serious because of my admiration for a fairy tale.

“It’s not like you at all.” However, it appeared that Lady Maika did not see me in the same way. “You’re much more extreme than your appearance suggests,

but you're also extremely kind. I know you're not going to do anything absurd just because you took offense. Although I've seen you act rashly because you got angry out of kindness."

I wondered what made her think I was extreme. I was just as gentle and mild-mannered as my looks suggested.

As my doubts piled up, Lady Maika nodded with a gentle look on her face. "It's because of Renge, right?" She spoke as if she had it all figured out. "And Chief Marco, I guess. You must be frustrated that their kind help wasn't appreciated even though they did everything in their power."

I felt compelled to nod to her inquiring stare. "I guess that is true to an extent..."

As I replied as vaguely as possible, Lady Maika gave a motherly smile. "I feel the same. Especially in regard to Renge. Chief Marco mentioned she's always been shy. It must have taken her a lot of courage to go talk to Suiren and become friends."

I nodded in complete agreement. I could not deny that Ajole's reaction made me even angrier when imagining Lady Renge's shock.

"Renge is already shy to begin with. To think that she withdrew herself even further after getting into a fight with her friend Suiren..." Lady Maika said.

It was a waste of her talent. If she had been more proactive in her interactions with her surroundings, she could have achieved so much more by now. This was a potentially huge loss of assets. I could not hide my frustration.

"Yeah, it makes you want to do something for her," I said.

Lady Maika replied with a cheerful smile. "You really are so kind, Ash. That's why I—Heh heh." She hid her slightly red cheeks with her teacup. After drinking up the tea, she stood up brimming with energy. "All right! Let's start today's work then!"

"You seem motivated." Her sudden change of mood left me perplexed.

On the spur of the moment, she raised her fist. "If all goes according to plan, I'm sure we'll be able to mediate between Suiren and Renge."

“Yes, sounds great. I had planned on confronting Suiren anyway sometime.”

“I’ll help where I can!”

Immediately after I moved back to my desk together with the energized Lady Maika, the Promotion Office’s door opened.

“G-Good morning!” Lady Renge’s voice was twice as loud as usual.

“Morning, Renge!”

“Good morning. You seem to be in a good mood today.”

Uncharacteristically, Lady Renge clearly agreed. “Yes! I’ll also do my best!”

She sat down on her desk full of motivation and with a tint of red on her cheeks. Her attitude was unusually proactive. Just now, she had said “I’ll also” if I had heard correctly.

When I sent a fleeting glimpse towards Lady Maika, she scratched her face in an adorable manner. Most likely, Lady Renge had overheard our earlier conversation. Both Lady Maika and I seemed to agree on that point. We had not talked about anything that we did not want her to hear, but I felt like we had said some slightly embarrassing things for her to hear. *Let’s just not talk about this anymore.* Once again, Lady Maika and I exchanged glances and nodded in agreement. I took a deep breath and picked up some documents. There was a lot of work to do.

“Oh, looks like we received a donation from Quid.”

Mr. Quid frequently donated money to the Territory Reform Promotion Office to increase our budget, and he appeared to have done it again. The spirit lamp must have been a success, and these were the returning profits. Since the laboratory’s development speed had increased, our budget tended to be insufficient, so this donation was more than welcomed. I had to go thank him in person another day.

During the agricultural experiment plan’s second year, reports showed that Ajole village started to stabilize. Recultivating desolate fields was a hard task at first, but once you had conquered the fields, they started cooperating. Of

course, nature was still mostly in charge. As such, it required a great deal of effort to keep those fields under control, but the villagers of Ajole seemed to be doing fine. They were slowly turning into fine farmers as they regained their lost knowledge and techniques. I even considered the possibility of using this fall as a turning point to complete the first stage of the plan. However, I was met with disquieting news, almost as if some predator had found fault with my over-optimistic calculation.

“Chief Louis recovered and he is coming back as village chief?”

Glen, who was diligently making round trips between the city and the village, confirmed my question with a worried look on his face.

“Is it not good news that he recovered?” I asked.

“Isn’t it a bit suspicious that he would ‘recover’ at such an opportunistic time after lying ill for over a year?”

His disdainful tone conveyed his disapproval of the recovery better than any bad language could have done. In general, Glen was a virtuous boy who did not speak ill of others. He was the type of person who easily turned jealousy into respect. He was great at distilling people’s good sides and openly expressing his favorable opinions. You could say that he was the epitome of a knight. Steadily, Glen approached his own idealized image. To see someone like him express disdain so clearly was not just unusual but concerning.

“What is Chief Louis up to?” I asked.

“So far, he hasn’t done anything that stands out, but...I guess you could say his actions are disquieting.”

According to Glen, the villagers who did not show themselves willing to work much had all gathered around Chief Louis. Just hearing that already made my head hurt. Until now, those delinquents who slacked off and neglected the farm work had been isolated. I had made sure of this. Humans tended to lose their motivation when they saw people slacking off next to them. Therefore, I tried turning Ajole village into a place where those delinquents were the minority and the honest, hardworking people the majority.

If you rewarded those who worked hard with extra food, then naturally the

fellows who did not receive as much food would feel inferior. There were no benefits to hanging out with those delinquents. On the contrary, if people stuck to the model villagers, they could learn some tricks and maybe even receive some of that extra food. *Now, who would you prefer as friends?* The residents of Ajole naturally went with the hardworking model villagers.

That system allowed me to isolate the delinquents from the rest and make sure they did not possess any influence. However, now there was news of a conspiracy between the delinquents and Chief Louis. While the latter had not worked at all in the past year, he was still the village chief, which made him the most influential person in Ajole. I had a bad feeling just thinking about a conspiracy between discontented residents and the village authority.

I pressed on my temples in an attempt to soothe my headache while confirming. “How is Suiren doing?”

“It’s tough on her. Chief Louis doesn’t even talk to me, but he keeps giving instructions of his own to Suiren.”

“Oh, is that so?” A shrill warning sound signaled an emergency stop of my mild-mannered ways. “As the village participating in the agricultural experiment, anyone in Ajole, including the village chief, must follow the Territory Reform Promotion Office’s instructions.”

And rightfully so. We had been left in charge of their village by order of the count, who had the power to appoint and dismiss village chiefs. Consequently, our position was above the village chief’s.

“So you are telling me that he is giving out unauthorized orders to Suiren, who is under our superior command.”

He had some nerve to challenge someone of higher ranking. Was he prepared to get legally crushed by my authority?

Inside my head, I was already constructing the gallows when Glen voiced his worries of the highest priority. “Yes, precisely. And even I can tell that his instructions won’t have any good influence on the fields. Suiren and the other villagers don’t want the harvest yield to decrease either, you know? Suiren’s been trying her best to explain the situation and refute her father’s arguments.”

“Oh? I am pleased to hear that.”

It appeared that Suiren and the other villagers had learned how to steadily stand on their own feet after spending the last year under my guidance improving their meals through their own hard work. Since I had spent a whole year observing them, I apparently had grown attached to them. I was soothed by the signs of their growth. And accordingly, I also felt angry towards Chief Louis. It felt like I was swelling up to the point of exploding due to the difference in temperature between the feelings of calmness and rage.

“We should precipitate our next expedition,” I declared.

“I agree. Judging from your smile, it looks like I can count on you this time.”

In order to maintain morale, it was important for any superior to show that they were in control of the situation. *Glen, you don't have to look so stiff. You can reciprocate the smile, you know?*

Now then, I wasted my precious vacation time to join an extraordinary expedition party, which was greeted as usual by Lady Suiren. However, the fact that she greeted us further away from the village than usual already revealed some of the problems.

“U-Um... Ash! Listen, I...”

Lady Suiren's uneasiness was markedly written on her face when she tried to tell me something. It appeared that she carried a heavier burden than anticipated from Glen's report. I showed more consideration than usual towards my ally, who was clearly doing her best—I greeted her with a gentle smile.

“I have not seen you in a long time, Suiren. Glen told me that you have been having a hard time, so I came to help. You do not have to worry anymore.”

“Th-Thank you!”

I had only replied to her initial greeting, but I could already see the relief on her face.

“You can thank Glen. I only grasped the situation because of his report.”

“Y-Yes, will do!”

In an instant, her somber expression changed into a bright and cheerful one. It seemed they had gotten along quite well this year. I would have loved to hear more about these two, but more pressing matters were at hand.

“Let us not lose any time then. Can you bring me to your father? Since I did not get to meet him while he was sick in bed, I have a lot of things to tell him.”

“Y-Yes, um...” She looked up at me with a worrying look before bowing her head and wishing me good luck.

At the village chief’s house, Chief Louis, who had been bedridden for over a year, was sitting in an unexpectedly sturdy posture in his chair. A feeble smile came over his fairly plump face. He probably was the only overweight person in this village. It indeed seemed a bit suspicious that he would have recovered from a long-lasting illness at such an ideal time.

“You must be from the Territory Reform Promotion Office. You also look very young, like your chief.”

He reached out his hand from the seat of honor at his table and I shook it from the lower seat. When I had met with Chief Marco from Adele it had been the opposite, by the way.

“Allow me to introduce myself. I am Ash, the Territory Reform Promotion Office’s head of planning.”

From our handshake, I immediately realized that Chief Louis was a stranger to hard work. His skin was not calloused or rough at all. Conversely, the hands of Lady Suiren, a young maiden in love, looked much more like those of a hardworking person. Within ten seconds of seeing his face, I concluded that Chief Louis could not be trusted—neither as a farmer nor as a civil official.

“Let us not waste anymore time, then, Chief Louis. I have come to review the agricultural experiment plan’s future. Is that all right with you?”

Chief Louis seemed to be taken aback. He was slightly annoyed by my sudden proposal to talk business, but he readily agreed. “Yes, of course. Due to my long-lasting illness, I inconvenienced everyone, including my daughter. I need to make up for that time.”

This guy seemed indeed to be unaware of his current position. In his mind, he had already regained his power as the village chief and relieved Lady Suiren of her duties as his representative. It was time to teach him that the Promotion Office, which was currently managing this village, had no intention of letting him do that.

“You should not be pushing yourself this hard so quickly after recovering. Besides, Suiren has produced great results this past year during her time as acting village chief.”

“Yes, it appears that my daughter has been very active. Unfortunately, I haven’t been able to send her to the military academy, but she managed to grow considerably through this project.”

“And that is why I would like to keep her in charge of the plan’s local management. If I suddenly changed the manager, that would only lead to confusion.”

Although there was in fact already confusion in this village thanks to Chief Louis. It would have been better if he just kept sleeping and recovered a bit more from his “illness.”

As I let him know in polite language that he should keep out of our affairs, Chief Louis nodded several times with a feeble smile on his face, making it unclear whether he had realized my intentions or not.

“It looks like my daughter really did her best. I already heard from the villagers, but hearing it from a capable city-dweller like you reaffirms it.” Keeping his slight smile, Chief Louis went on to defy my point head on. “But my daughter also has her flaws. I cannot overlook that as the village chief. As an outsider, you probably wouldn’t understand...”

“Oh.”

Since Chief Louis had graduated from the military academy—where he had also befriended Chief Marco—he knew how to properly quarrel with the elite without causing offense. This middle-aged man, who pretended to be ill and was fatter than anyone in the village, put on a feeble smile and told me this was none of my business as an outsider. I reflexively grinned in response to his manner of speaking, which enraged even someone as mild-mannered as myself.

“May I ask you what kind of flaws she has?”

“I’m afraid I cannot tell an outsider... Please just consider for a moment why I may have been ill for such an abnormally long time.”

“That does not sound appropriate.”

He appeared to be saying that his biological daughter had confined him in an attempt to gain power as village chief. What an absurd excuse. Did he really think I was going to buy that?

“Maybe we should have some soldiers from the city investigate this disturbing situation,” I said.

“I am grateful for the proposal, but...” His facial expression was the only thing apologetic about Chief Louis as he shook his head. “That won’t be necessary, since it’s an internal affair.”

“I am afraid I cannot overlook this crime. This village is home to my precious project, and I cannot have any problems interfering with that project’s management.”

Since any poor excuse would only make his offenses worse, Chief Louis was not able to reply honestly. “I see. I guess we’ve got a problem, then.”

“Yes, a serious problem indeed.”

Both the current and the next count had been very enthusiastic about this project. There was no way that the opinion of an out-of-luck village chief could sway them. Nevertheless, the man in front of my eyes who called himself the village chief did not seem to understand the situation.

“Could we not suspend the project for the time being?”

His outrageous excuse was followed by an even more outrageous proposal. So outrageous that this discussion was about to break down.

“Are you serious?”

I voiced my honest surprise in a casual tone, unbecoming of an ongoing negotiation. If Mother Yae had heard me, she would have seriously reprimanded me for my blunder.

As expected, Chief Louis continued to show his arrogance. “Yes. Moreover, I have heard from some villagers that there have been problems with your plan.”

“Problems?”

This was no good. I was so surprised that I only repeated back what he said.

“Some villagers have been unfairly receiving less food. And this seems to be the result of your guidance, so you must have known yourself.”

“Right.”

I could think of a reason or two why he claimed that it was unfair to give larger rewards to those who worked harder than those who did not put in much effort or did no work at all.

“As a city dweller who has food, clothing, and shelter in abundance, you may not understand this, but in this poor village, we have always helped each other out.”

“Right.”

Except those who were helping the most were undoubtedly the villagers who justifiably received more food rather than those who “unfairly” received less. The latter were only in charge of whatever little work was leftover, which I did not count as helping out. To me they were a kind of parasite. And I absolutely hated parasites. I hated the very concept of them.

As I reevaluated Chief Louis’s sanity in light of our clashing points of view, his voice became increasingly more excited as he seemed to head for the climax.

“If your plan requires me to abandon even just one of my dear fellow villagers, I cannot accept it.”

“I see.” Since he appeared to be finished for now, I briefly acknowledged his statement before confirming. “Are you insane?”

“No, of course not. I just don’t want to abandon any of my villagers, even if they are in the minority. You on the other hand want to abandon them, so maybe you’re—”

Before Chief Louis could finish his sentence with that strained, feeble smile on his face, I raised my hand and interrupted him. “That is not what I meant. This

agricultural experiment plan was officially put in place through negotiations with the acting village chief. It sounds like you want to unilaterally tear up our agreement.”

That was the implied meaning of the plan’s suspension. If they had acted like this against another territory, it would have led to a war. Within the territory, it would be considered an act of treason. Did he really want to cause such great trouble?

“Not at all.” Apparently not. “I merely want it to be suspended. Yes, my daughter temporarily inherited the authority of the village chief. However, that was due to my illness, and shamefully I only have a vague memory of what happened during that period.”

“Meaning?”

“I think His Excellency the count, thoughtful as he is, will take into consideration the fact that I was not able to make a proper judgment as village chief when the contract was signed.”

No, I don’t think His Excellency will take that into consideration.

The count was the type of person that became enraged by such a painful—or should I say unsightly—excuse. At the very least, the acting count, who was going to hear this first, would immediately consider him an enemy.

“So, in conclusion...” While fighting a headache brought on by these fruitless negotiations, I summoned my remaining willpower. “You want to void the contract between us and Ajole village regarding our plan’s implementation because you doubt the legitimacy of the acting village chief—Lady Suiren—who signed it?”

“No, I want to suspend it. Do not mistake me. I want to suspend it so I can take some time to examine it again... Other than that, you are right.”

Earlier, this man in front of me had already accused his own daughter. He wanted to push all the responsibility onto her and turn over the tables. He may not have been sane, but he was serious. I wondered if he was aware of the huge mound of problems his proposal entailed.

“In that case, we will also have to suspend the food supplies and ask you to

return the farming tools while the plan is on hold. Are you okay with that?"

"Well, that cannot be helped." Chief Louis, who worriedly shook his head, did seem to understand the gravity of the situation after all. "However, I don't think you can carry back all the supplies and farming tools right away. If you do that, many villagers will suffer. And I don't think His Compassionate Excellency would want that. Besides, the villagers may find it hard to go back to work if the plan resumes."

"Hm. I did not consider that problem. Thank you for pointing it out. You have got quite a unique point of view." *Must be a parasite's point of view.*

This parasite in front of my eyes who called himself a village chief was looking for more support using the hardworking villagers as a shield. I had to admit that he was quite skilled at using others. That was harder to forgive than him being incompetent.

I had intended to reply with a smile on my face, but I was unable to keep my bloodlust from showing in my eyes. Chief Louis must have sensed it, as he hastily expanded upon his statement.

"Moreover, there is a possibility that the starving villagers would resort to evil deeds in order to feed their families."

"That would of course be a problem. Especially with the promising Adele village nearby." Since my plan also aimed to resolve the problem of potential banditry, I shared his concern.

However, Chief Louis seemed disposed to dig an even deeper grave for himself, as he presented me with a statement that exceeded all my expectations. "And I've heard that the farming techniques our villagers learned this time around are new and secret. It would be a shame if those were leaked to the outside."

"Yes, that would be a grave problem."

This parasite was even capable of threatening its host. What a versatile specimen. Unfortunately, he had made a fatal mistake by angering his host.

"I understand your concerns. In that case, however, I cannot make a decision myself." I let out a brief sigh before standing up. "I have to report back to my

superior and Lord Itsuki. It was a short visit, but I will take my leave now.”

“Understood. I’m sorry for causing such inconvenience due to my long-lasting illness.”

“Not at all. You never know what will lead to a good outcome in this world.”

This was the only thing that I could say with confidence. After talking with this village chief, I realized what a true godsend Lady Suiren had been as a manager this past year. When I had first met her, she was quite the problem child herself, but she did not harbor any bad intentions. I had thought our general—luck—was not going to show itself this time, but it turned out that it had actually been hard at work. *I’ll have to send a prayer of gratitude to Goddess Yuika later.*

Suiren’s Perspective

Ash went back the same day he had come to the village. He was always busy, but whenever he came all the way to this village, he usually stayed at least a day to observe the fields, inspect the food storage, or investigate the forest. He wasn’t his usual self. I felt compelled to ask my dad what on earth he had told Ash. In brief, he had threatened him in a very polite manner.

Unsure whether I should turn pale in fear or red in anger, I started shouting loudly. “How can you talk to Ash like that?! What do you think will happen?”

“What will happen? Nothing. What can a greenhorn like him do?”

Each time I heard my dad sneer at Ash it sent shivers down my spine. He had confined himself to his bed this whole time, so he didn’t know how dangerous Ash was. He hadn’t seen Ash dispassionately scold us with an intent to kill after our first harvest. I still felt the flame of his words singe my chest. You didn’t want to make him your enemy. Rather, you wanted him on your side.

While he could be scary at times, he was a great teacher, and he didn’t spare any support. When my father had given permission to those villagers to just take the food supplies, Ash had sent us a little extra food, and when I had begged for help in tears, he had sent reinforcements. That’s how powerful he was. At the very least, it was thanks to Ash that no one had died from starvation

this whole year.

“Look how great our fields are thanks to Ash! There’s no need to make things complicated now!”

“You keep quiet. This is our chance to make this village wealthier.”

“There’s no need to. Just look at the fields!”

Our once desolate fields had become this abundant. No, we made them this abundant. The villagers and I made them abundant while complaining and almost giving up, but in the end continuing, thanks to Ash pushing our backs. If I said “desperate to survive,” Ash was going to get angry again. I had never in my life worked so hard towards anything else. Those fields were the fruits of our labor.

After listening to my plea, my father gave a wry smile and grumbled. “That’s a problem too.”

“What do you mean?”

“Just think about it.”

My dad lowered his voice and muttered, almost as quietly as a crawling insect. “This village has always had bad harvests. If that suddenly changed after those guys appeared, the village chief would be labeled inept!”

What about it? That was obvious already. The village managed to get back on track in no time once a proper leader appeared and took charge. Anyone could see how inept the village chief was.

“Dad, are you serious? That’s such a trivial reason.”

“It’s not trivial at all! You’ll also stop being the village chief’s daughter, you know?!”

You didn’t do anything when this village was on the verge of extinction, so you can’t really call yourself the village chief anyways.

We were still called the chief family only because I went out to the fields and worked together with everyone else. It didn’t amount to much more than courtesy. And this man, who had hidden in his bed this whole time just—! My words got stuck in my throat. I was surprised at how hot they felt. Even when I

had snapped at Ash, I hadn't been this angry. I had never been this angry before. I was furious with my biological dad. I tightly clenched my fists, not knowing what I was going to do next, but my next move was prevented by some sudden bad news.

"H-Help! Suiren, the people that went into the forest encountered treants!"

A fellow villager had barged in as if he had rammed the door.

"T-Treants? What? Wait, why did they go into the forest...? Dad?!"

I immediately knew whom to suspect. Even though Ash had told us to keep away from the forest because it seemed strange! As I turned around to stare down my dad, he had already escaped into the bedroom.

"You've got to be kidding me! Wh-Where are you going?!"

"Sorry, I feel ill... I leave the rest to you."

"You what?!"

I couldn't help but hurl a cup from the table at my cowardly dad.

Aaah! I can't take this anymore. What should I do? I didn't know what to do in a situation like this at all. No one had taught me. Why did this happen now? This was too much. I couldn't do anything. I was scared. I felt like I was suffocating. But I didn't want to shut my eyes. On the contrary, I clenched my teeth and opened my eyes.

This was the same as always. It had been like this the whole past year. Ash always told me things I didn't know. So many firsts. And I was always on the verge of giving up and breaking into tears, but in the end I always managed to do the previously impossible. This was nothing compared to Ash's surging waves of orders.

First, you need to calm down, Suiren.

Treants had appeared. Demons—which we should fight. But there was no one strong enough in this village. It was impossible. Nothing could be done. Absolutely nothing could be done... *Someone, help!* I was about to cry. *I mean, I mean...* The moment I had thought about asking for their help, their faces had popped into my head. Ash was waiting for me on the other side. Glen was

leading me by the hand. And even without looking backward, I knew whose small hand was pushing me forward. *Thank you for always having my back, Renge.*

“I’ll go to the city to get help!” I declared.

I was certain they were going to help. But first, I needed to get within a distance where they could hear my scream for help. The city was far away, but not so far that you couldn’t walk there.

“Something can be done.”

Apart from the person that had brought the news, other villagers had gathered at the house after hearing the ruckus. We were friends who had suffered together through starvation and Ash’s unreasonable requests. We had managed to cultivate the fields while on the verge of an emotional breakdown. They all looked worried. Had we come this far only to be killed off by demons? That thought made my worries turn into anger. I no longer wanted to ignore the absurd. I no longer thought that “nothing could be done.” I felt energized.

“Everyone, get back to your homes! I promise I will go get help!”

I was not going to let it end here. Not after we had struggled this much to get here. I was not going to give up so easily!

Single-mindedly, I walked along the carriage’s wheel tracks towards the city—towards them. I kept walking to call for help as soon as possible. The sun had already set a while ago. The plants alongside the path scornfully laughed at me, walking through the dark all by myself. The cold night wind followed me, trying to put out the torch flame. Some wolves were howling, but they sounded far away, so they weren’t after me. The strange something that had run past my legs must have been a mouse. And the mysterious aura coming from the meadow must have been my imagination. It had to be. Or...

In order to prevent myself from stopping in my tracks and crouching down, I just reminded myself to keep moving forward, one step at a time. I was scared. I was in pain too. With each step, my legs were throbbing with pain from the soles to the knees to the lower back. I was also thirsty. My water flask was already empty, and my lips hurt with each gasp. My tears had dried out a while

back, as had my sweat. But still, I moved forward, biting my teeth to withstand my leg pain and swallowing down any feeble complaints. Always forward.

I was surprised at myself. Had I always been this strong? I felt my cracked lips turn into a smile. There was no way someone like me was strong. I just had to remind myself how I had brushed away my childhood friend's hand. If only I had been strong enough to grasp her hand back then, I would have... I had always regretted it—even now. I was weak. I had always been weak. I was a coward who had shut her eyes and tried to run away from her weak self.

But now, I had enough strength to fearfully gaze with narrow eyes at my own weakness. What would happen to the village if I broke down now? It would get attacked and destroyed by the demons. What would happen to the fields if I didn't call for help? They would go to waste. What would happen to the villagers if I stopped walking? What would happen to everyone who gathered in the fields, worked together while complaining, and shared their joy when the wheat crops finally ripened? This was the scariest part to imagine—they would all die.

Every single face popped into my head. I hadn't remembered their faces this clearly until recently. That just made it scarier. My weak self would not be able to keep it together if those faces disappeared. I had to prevent it at all costs...!

I moved my legs forward. Always forward. To protect my weak self, to run away from the scary things. Forward. Always forward. The torchlight was finally blown out by the night wind. The darkness gathered around as if it were going to squash me.

"I need to keep going forward!"

I stared at my feet. Even without a light, as long as I didn't lose sight of the path at my feet, I would eventually arrive in the city. To see where Renge, Ash, and Glen lived...

My eyes got blurry. Actually, there was some kind of light. My eyes were dazzled by the light.

"Ah..."

I looked up. I thought I had heard an old, familiar voice. The white light driving

away the night appeared like a hand reaching out to me—my eyes welled up with tears, which I had thought dried up. At the end of a long night, the morning had arrived. Under the rising sun, the stone wall rose like a watchtower. It was just like Glen had described it. Itsutsu City's stone wall was crooked and a little worn out. It was a wall that reassured everyone who looked upon it.





After enduring the harsh feat of leaving the village on the same day that I had arrived, I promptly requested an emergency meeting with Chief Maika and the acting count. Usually, when the three of us convened, it ended up being more of a family tea party rather than a work meeting. Lord Itsuki loved his cute niece, and Lady Maika also tended to act more casually around her uncle to distract him from his daily heavy responsibilities. As Lady Maika's friend, it was my duty to remind them of the topics we were discussing. Considering that those meetings often dealt with important matters, such as big-budget decisions, they often became too loose. However, this time around no one was smiling.

"Out of the question."

Hearing my report, Lord Itsuki's decision was quick and concise. As expected, the compassionate and thoughtful acting count was furious at Chief Louis's request.

After responding to my report with that one short statement, Lord Itsuki quickly called his maid and gave her some orders. The three of us had decided at the meeting that Chief Louis deserved punishment. Now we just needed to follow the required procedures and wait for his disposal. I wondered when we could leave for Ajole village again.

As I planned the next expedition in my head, Lady Maika pouted with her arms crossed. "But why would Louis say something so stupid?"

Oh! Lady Maika did not bother to address him by his proper title. As far as I was aware, he was the second person to receive that treatment.

"I mean, you're an emissary from the Territory Reform Promotion Office!" she continued. "You're an authority figure! I told him at the start that the Promotion Office is an important department working in the count's name. And Suiren should know this too."

By anyone's standards, confronting me with those statements was the same as picking a fight with the count himself. It was a terrible act against the person who appointed the village chiefs, led the military, and administered justice.

Naturally, Lady Maika had her doubts.

Lord Itsuki took a sip from his tea before letting out a sigh and warned his cute niece with an exhausted voice. “Unfortunately, that’s just the way this world works. Some people just lack the imagination to understand their position when talking to others. It’s a real nuisance.” Lord Itsuki had a troubled look on his face. He tried to feign a smile, but he did not even manage that.

“How’s it a nuisance?” she asked.

“Well, take someone like Chief Louis. Since he thinks himself superior, he makes some very brazen requests. He casually asks for things that we just can’t provide.”

In this case, his requests included food aid and the village’s sovereignty. While the former one was already quite brazen, the latter one was even worse. It was like he was begging for a luxury mansion in exchange for his pocket money.

“Since I don’t want to rock the boat too much, I’m even prepared to make some small compromises, but people like him usually don’t have any intentions of making concessions. In other words, you can’t negotiate with them,” Lord Itsuki concluded.

“Which leaves you with only one solution...”

That’s right. If they don’t want to talk things through, you’ve got no choice but to rely on force or authority.

“Exactly, that’s why it’s such a nuisance. You’ve got to rely on force if you can’t have a proper discussion, but it’s not something I like doing so easily. It always ends up creating tensions.”

Once you raised your fist, anyone who witnessed it was going to perceive you as a violent person henceforth. And since no one wanted to be on the receiving end of violence, they were going to be constantly on guard, or maybe even prepare to fight back. From there, it did not take much for a fight to break out, so it was in the interest of those wielding the power to resolve conflicts peacefully. Of course, there were exceptions.

Lady Maika enthusiastically nodded along to the explanation. “That makes sense... It’s a considerable drawback if there are rumors about you being

violent. Even if it's justified, you don't want to use your power on trivial matters. I get it."

Which raised the question whether it was all right to use force this time. If you followed this logic, it may have been difficult to deal with Chief Louis. However, this time we were only going to make use of reasonable political power and wield it within the confines of the law. The other party had clearly violated the official contract that had been signed between the count and the acting village chief at the time. If he had only requested the plan's suspension and a review, we may have been able to gloss over the matter, but he had used the classified technology as a hostage to extort resources from us, and that was a crime. In other words, we were only going to resort to force to contain a criminal, and that fell under the banner of maintaining public order. No matter how creative Chief Louis's point of view may have been, he was going to get crushed because he had defied authority.

"It's all thanks to Ash making him commit on the spot. Or did he dig his own grave?"

"I think it is the latter. I just reminded him of the problems and confirmed his replies."

And even then, Chief Louis probably still considered his requests to be reasonable, so there was no other way to put it than saying that he did not understand his position.

Hearing our exasperated sighs, Lady Maika tilted her head in contemplation. "So...you're saying...this Louis guy really is just stupid? That's all there is to it?"

That was probably the easiest explanation, so I nodded in agreement.

"Wow... I thought he might have had some intricate plan, but that's it, huh?" Lady Maika said.

"What kind of intricate plan?" I asked.

"Like a conspiracy with another territory, since he mentioned the classified technology..."

A plot involving spies? Sounds interesting. But there was no need to worry this time around. "Impossible. I would have sensed something was wrong during the

past year if it were something that intricate.”

At any rate, I had experience getting assaulted by assassins, so I was aware that secret spies existed in this world. Since we were dealing with highly classified information, I had watched out for anything in that regard. In my opinion, Chief Louis was a small-time crook who only saw the coins in front of his eyes. He was not brave enough to rebel against the count. He had only ended up in that position because he was not aware of the consequences of his actions.

“As the monkey god teaches us, ‘He who stands near the root of a large tree cannot gaze at the sky.’ A mere swindler who wants some change is incapable of devising a plot to turn a whole territory against himself.”

“Oh... Somehow, it feels like we’re missing out. Although it should be a good thing that it can be resolved easily.”

I knew how she felt, but we should keep our disappointment in moderation. The kind of spy action where a single person stops a war probably would have annihilated a village or two. Luckily, the problem this time was only a small-time crook whom we could dispose of with the help of the law.

It took a week to prepare the legal documents necessary to sweep away Chief Louis. During that time, I organized an expeditionary party. Unlike the previous special expedition, we were also going to carry resources with us, so I added everyone to the group, including the patrol squad.

Before even setting off, I already looked forward to our way back, since the former village chief was most likely going to take a seat in one of the wagons.

While painting that picture inside my head, I was checking our cargo one last time together with Lady Renge when Glen suddenly stormed in. “Ash! Something terrible happened!”

“What is going on?”

As I turned around towards Glen’s alarming voice, I realized that it was indeed an extraordinary circumstance. Glen was holding Lady Sui ren in his arms. Her hair and clothes were a mess—you could tell at first glimpse that she was

exhausted.

“Suiren! Why are you here?”

Lady Renge panicked and shouted louder than I had ever heard her speak. Considering that Lady Suiren was not supposed to be here, that was a natural reaction.

Upon hearing Lady Renge’s voice, Lady Suiren opened her heavy eyelids. “Renge...? And Ash...?”

“Suiren! What happened? Are you... Are you okay?” She timidly grasped Lady Suiren’s hand.

Feeling the warm touch of her friend, whom she had not seen since their fight, Lady Suiren gave an apologetic look and said, “I’m fine... But the village is...”

Glenn handed Lady Suiren over to Lady Renge as the poor girl started shedding tears while whispering into her friend’s ear.

“Suiren said that the village chief sent men into the forest,” Lady Renge said.

“Even though I told them not to go in there barring an emergency...” That parasite had already managed to cause trouble within just one week. Being at my wits’ end, I urged Glen to continue. I did not want to hear it, but I had to know. “Do you know any details?”

“The village chief sent about twenty people to gather food in the forest. Only less than half came back.”

I felt dizzy out of sheer despair. More than ten of my precious human resources, who had learned the newest farming techniques over the past year, had been lost at once. No words could do this tragedy justice.

“What on earth happened?” I barely managed to talk while gnashing my teeth.

It also took Glen a considerable amount of willpower to speak his next words. “They were attacked by treants.”

For a moment, I was left speechless at the appearance of a second demon species, following the werewolf. Was Chief Louis the god of annoyance? Just

when I had thought that our conquest of hell was finally coming to an end after diligently working for a whole year, there was a rush of surging waves of danger flooding us. It was too cruel considering all our efforts. It was a dramatic turnaround brought about by general luck snatching away our victory, which had been a result of hard work and camaraderie between the vanguard, sponsor, main troops, and second-in-command. Chief Louis must have indeed been a god. Maybe the god of plague, risen from the depths of hell. *Goddess Yuika, may your fortune smile on me!*

My prayers were interrupted by the young girl's sobbing. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry... Please forgive me..."

"Why are you apologizing? You didn't do anything wrong, Suiren," Lady Renge said.

Lady Suiren had broken down crying. Now clinging to Lady Renge, who was hugging her, she repented while crying. "No... I mean I'm sorry for saying all those things three years ago..."

Upon hearing the words "three years ago," Lady Renge immediately understood what she meant, and gently shook her head. "Don't worry. I don't mind at all. More importantly..."

"No, no... I finally realized how selfish I was back then." Lady Suiren recited all that had happened during the past year with tears trickling down her cheeks. "I didn't know how hard it was to increase the harvest yield. I never considered how precious the food that you shared with us was. I didn't realize that the thought of everyone dying was this scary... Back then, I didn't feel anything at all... I didn't think of all the villagers... I am sorry..."

The girl repeatedly apologized. In her exhaustion, she was desperate to make up for all the spiteful feelings she had harbored these past three years. This stood in contrast with Lady Renge, who had worried about her friend all these years.

Lady Renge tightly hugged her friend while crying. "You've turned into a fine leader for your village. I'm proud of you as a friend."



Upon seeing Lady Renge forgive her friend, I slapped my cheeks to pull myself together. I had prayed enough to Goddess Yuika. At any rate, I faithfully prayed to her every day without fail. But now was the time to act as much as humanly possible. If I did not pull through here, their beautiful tears were going to be sullied with sadness.

“Expedition squad! Listen up! There has been a change of plans!”

Following my command, all the troops fell silent at once and turned towards me, already sensing that something was wrong. They were truly reliable professionals.

“Our objective is no longer to transport food aid to Ajole village, but an emergency response to a treant attack. Our priority is rescuing the villagers. After that, we can come up with a plan to subjugate the treants. Understood?”

After hearing everyone’s “Yes, Sir,” I ordered them to first unpack the food from the wagons so the carriages could drive faster and with enough space inside to evacuate the villagers. We would only carry the absolute minimum food necessary for the squad and villagers.

I sent a messenger to Lord Itsuki and Lady Maika and looked at the two girls.

“Renge, make sure Suiren gets some rest.”

“I-I have to go back to the village too!”

It was not Lady Renge who responded to my instructions, but Lady Suiren. She appeared ready to shake off Renge’s arms at any moment. I met her with a stern look.

“I will go. No matter what.” She had a very determined look on her face.

No one said you can’t come along. “Suiren, please get some rest, even if it is just for a little bit. Once the preparations are done, we will leave. You will be in charge of giving the evacuation orders to the villagers.”

“L-Leave it to me!”

I’m counting on you. After all, I would not be able to properly manage all of that.

In terms of rescuing the villagers, we just had to move as fast as possible, but the problem was subduing the treants. After my fight with the werewolf, I had been preparing by reading up on demon species. Treants appeared to be two-meter-tall humanoid trees—on the outside at least. They were tough-skinned monsters that did not know fatigue, had astounding stamina similar to werewolves, and endlessly kept attacking. They cornered and crushed their enemies with their huge bodies and strength. However, their speed was as slow as one would have expected from a plant. It was thus possible to outrun a single treant. Still, their pursuit was relentless, so they would end up destroying wherever you sought refuge unless it was a heavily guarded encampment.

Since some of the villagers had safely returned from the forest to Ajole, it was to be expected that the treants were going to follow them there. Moreover, the fact that only a minority of the villagers had returned suggested that there were not just a couple but a considerable amount of treants lurking inside the forest.

“How can we drive them back?”

The treants’ weak point was their head. Unlike the werewolves’ absurd head anatomy, it appeared that treants would die from an injury to their brain. *A plant with a brain? Yes, indeed.* Treants had brains. They may have looked like humanoid trees, but that was only their armor. Inside were corpses of anthropoid apes such as macaques and gorillas.

The species called treant were in fact not plants that had defied all logic and learned to walk; they were plants that had taken over animal corpses and moved them around. Either way, they defied logic. The fantasy concepts in this world really did not favor humanity at all. Still, treants stopped moving once the corpse’s head suffered damage, so all you had to do was aim for the head.

The problem was their extremely sturdy bark armor. It was almost impossible for a normal longbow to pierce it. According to the literature, you could deal with it by making them fall over and repeatedly bashing them with an ax. The best way to deal with them appeared to be the ballista. Unfortunately, we could not transport one of those to a remote village in a timely manner.

“Hm... Bashing in their skulls it is, then.”

I had an idea, although I was not sure how effective it would be. I went to one

of the now-empty carriages and talked to the driver. “Can you please take me to Quid’s shop? I am going to buy a weapon to deal with the treants.”

Hopefully this was going to work.

Suiren’s Perspective

“Suiren, can you drink this? Chef Yacoo thought soup might be better since you’re tired, so he made some for you.”

My childhood friend, whom I had severely hurt three years ago, treated me so kindly, as if nothing had ever happened. Or rather, I should say despite everything that had happened. She held out a spoon with a gentle smile that I had never seen before. I couldn’t believe that Renge, who had always walked behind me, had grown this strong.

“I’m sorry, Renge. I really am.”

“It’s okay. You don’t have to apologize. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

Even if she said so, there were still so many things that I hadn’t apologized for. It was not about her forgiving me or not. I had so many things that I needed to say. As my thoughts were running wild and I fell silent, Renge tightly grasped my hand. The same hand that I had pushed away on that day now handed me a warm bowl of soup. We both held on to it.

“You shouldn’t apologize, Suiren.”

“I-I shouldn’t?”

“Yes. You’re in charge of Ajole village after all. There are so many other things you should be doing instead of apologizing to your friend.”

I felt like crying again upon hearing her say those words. I lost count of how many times I had cried after thinking I had no more tears left. She was still calling me her friend even though I had hurt her so severely.

I firmly grasped the bowl and smiled instead of saying sorry. “Thanks. I actually haven’t eaten for a whole day...”

“There’s more in the kitchen, so let me know if you want more. You can have

as much as you want. Oh, but Chef Yacoo said that if you suddenly eat too much it might be bad for your body, so in moderation, okay?”

“Yeah, thanks.” *Really, thank you so much. For extending your hand on that day.*

Now I understood. I had been able to just about persist because you had reached out to me on that day. I had known all along that I was wrong because you had gazed at me even though I had hurt you on that day. When Ash had dragged me around, I was able to pull through because of Glen’s support and because I knew that I had been wrong. And now you had answered my shameless call for help by firmly grasping my hand again.

“I’ll make sure to do my best from here on out.” For the sake of Renge, who hadn’t abandoned me. And so that one day I would be able to proudly call her my friend again. Right now, I was still too embarrassed to say it. “First, I need to evacuate Ajole’s residents. I’ll do everything in my power to get them to safety.”

“I know you can do it.”

Renge’s words were filled with confidence. They were not just empty phrases or an attempt to put my mind at ease. Could there have been something about my current self that made her so confident? Maybe she was onto something.

“Yeah, I’ll get it done. Compared to Ash’s lessons, this is child’s play.”

Ash had dragged me around for a whole year. Some measly treants couldn’t be any worse. This past year had been really tough and painful, but it had also been a really important year, which I managed to overcome together with all the other villagers. Those efforts fueled a fire burning deep inside my chest.

“Just watch me, Renge. I won’t let something like this stop me.”

“Of course. I’m always watching you, Suiren.”

We smiled at each other before I tried the soup she had so graciously brought me.

“It’s tomato soup! It’s delicious!”

My face lit up. Tomatoes had secretly become one of my favorite vegetables

after Ash had made me try them last summer.

“It seems that Chef Yacoo and Ash have been studying tomatoes, drying and concentrating them in an effort to make them last longer,” Renge explained.

“Ash really has his hands in everything. Even though he must have been pretty busy just looking after us.”

“You’re right. Ash is not just a hard worker, but he also has a lot of consideration for others, and he’s very passionate...”

My childhood friend’s face blossomed like a flower in the spring sun when talking about Ash. Was he really the kind of charming person to warrant such a cute reaction?

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Ajole village was silent when we arrived in the early morning, following a night march. Amidst their exhaustion, the expedition squad—or rather, emergency response team—let out a sigh of relief seeing that the village was still fine. The treants’ slow speed was a blessing.

The response team was organized into two groups. The first one was the speed-focused combat squad, mainly made up of soldiers on horseback. The second one consisted mostly of the wagons that were tasked with escorting the villagers to safety. Lady Suiren, who had the most important role of urging the villagers to escape, accompanied the former group as they were leading the charge. More precisely, she was riding a horse together with Glen. Both of them had an excessively stiff and blank expression on their face due to their first shared ride together, even though we were right in the midst of an emergency. In consideration of their restraint, I decided not to investigate their inner thoughts.

As soon as we arrived at the village, Lady Suiren dismounted with Glen’s help and raised her voice in the center of the village.

“Everyone! It’s me, Suiren! I’ve brought help! You don’t have to worry anymore! Please come out and listen!”

As her voice resounded, the villagers came out of their homes with pale faces. In the meantime, I dispatched some of the guards towards the forest. They

would inform us if any treants appeared, so we could run away immediately. While there was indeed a combat squad, without any preparations they would have been unable to put up a fight against a group of treants.

“What? My father’s not here? Wh-Where did he go?”

Talking to some of the villagers, whose face had regained some color, Lady Suiren covered her mouth in surprise. It appeared the god of plague had manifested himself again.

“Um, Ash... I’m embarrassed to say this, but...my father—the village chief—has left the village.”

“Oh?”

It was not as bad as I had expected. If the current village chief was absent, Lady Suiren’s instructions would be harder to oppose. Now the question was, where had he gone? If he stayed true to his principles as a small-time crook...

“Did he leave by himself?” I asked.

“Apparently. Ah, well, he told everyone that they needed to take refuge in Adele village and...some villagers followed him.”

“‘Some’ followed him?”

Surveying the faces of the villagers, who had assembled in the public square, I got an idea of who was missing.

“Putting aside those who entered the forest, could it be that those were the same people that did not like doing farm work?”

Several of the villagers confirmed my suspicion.

I see. That probably works in our favor. “In that case, there is no problem.”

You really never knew what could lead to a good outcome in this world. It might slightly inconvenience Adele village, but I was confident that Chief Marco was capable of taking them in for a little while.

I nodded towards Lady Suiren. “Suiren, in the name of His Excellency the Count of Sacula, you are now officially in charge of Ajole village. Please use your authority to give evacuation orders to the villagers.”

“Y-Yes, understood!” Clenching her fist in front of her chest, Lady Suiren asserted in a loud voice. She radiated a strong confidence she had not had a year ago. The girl directed that confidence towards the villagers. “Everyone! Please prepare to leave the village!”

The villagers’ reaction was stiff and cold, but that was to be expected. All those who had remained here had refused Chief Louis’s proposal to evacuate. While Chief Louis’s nonexistent popularity may have been a factor in their decision, the villagers simply did not want to leave behind this village and their land.

“I know how you all feel. When Adele village proposed that we migrate three years ago, I felt the same. I didn’t want to leave the village. I didn’t want to get separated from everyone.”

Lady Suiren’s shivering shoulders expressed her lingering regret, but she made an effort to suppress her emotions. She was strong enough to know that she found herself in a position where she could not afford to show any weakness.

“Why did we feel that way three years ago? Until a year ago, we barely survived each day. We had no food. We were starving. And yet we didn’t want to leave the village. Because we liked this place? Because we wanted to stay together?”

One by one, the villagers nodded in agreement with the girl’s account of their shared circumstances. They started to accept their new leader.

“To a degree, yes. But most of all, we were...afraid. We didn’t know how we were going to live our lives outside this village. We didn’t know who was going to stay by our side once we got separated. We thought that this was the only place where we could keep on living.” Her following words negated her former self’s doubts. “But we are different now. Remember what we did over the past year. Did we suffer from hunger? Did we wait for someone to save us?”

Upon hearing her questions, the villagers looked at each other and nodded. Those gestures were filled with pride for their achievements from the past year.

“That’s right. We know it better than anyone else. Right now, we can survive on our own even if we leave this village. We were the ones who restored our

ruined fields to their former glory. We have all the skills necessary.” The leader faced towards me. “And let’s not forget that there are people who helped us this past year, just like three years ago there were people who helped us. Even if we leave this village, there are people who will stay by our side.”

I reacted to her words with a bow to show my respect. Her speech was so passionate that I felt like thanking her.

“We no longer have to be afraid of anything. So let’s leave this village behind!”

The repeated proposal didn’t cause any commotion this time around.

“I don’t want to lose you. And I’m not saying that out of my own insecurities. I’ve grown to cherish each and everyone of you, so I don’t want a single person to die.” Lady Suiren took a breath before issuing the order. “That’s why I am ordering you as Ajole’s chief to get ready to leave this village behind!”

All the villagers shouted in affirmation of Chief Suiren’s orders. Their voices were so loud that they drowned out any doubts.

The villagers loaded all the luggage they could carry onto the second squad’s wagons and set off towards Itsutsu city. Chief Suiren lowered her head in regret as she sat in the wagon at the tail end.

“I’m sorry for putting all of you in danger because of my village’s problems,” she said.

Upon hearing her commendable apology, someone from the remaining combat squad whistled. I was not sure whether it was someone from the patrol squad or Sir George’s troops. Either way, I heard some cheerful banter behind my back, and one of the new recruits from Sir George’s troops was pushed forward. Naturally, as the commanding officer, I had to take a strict attitude in regard to pranks among the troops.

“Glen, if you have anything to say, I will allow you to speak.”

“Me? N-No... I mean, they just pushed—”

“Glen, please follow my instructions and be more articulate.”

“Um...”

Glen, who was a little flustered after suddenly being pushed into the spotlight, noticed Chief Suiren’s look and cleared his throat.

“Ah, yes... You don’t have to worry, Chief Suiren. It is the solemn duty of the regional troops and knights to protect citizens like you with our swords.”

That sounded pretty smooth. With a grin on my face, I silently glimpsed at the middle-aged men behind me, who were also smirking. *Watch and learn, everyone.* This was how you made someone fall for you. Or I should probably say “fall for you again.” This would provide enough banter for the next couple of drinking parties!

“Ahem. I concur with our comrade-in-arms Glen, whom many revere as a knight among knights. Leave the rest to us,” I proclaimed.

“No one’s ever called me that...”

Stay quiet, Glen. “Well then, Chief Suiren. Let us meet again later in the city.”

“Yes. Please stay safe, everyone.”

Chief Suiren folded her hands to pray. She kept praying even after the horse carriage had started moving and drove out of sight.

“Did you see how frantically she prayed, you bastards? Now we’ve got to stay alive for the honor of the gods,” a soldier said.

As I looked over my shoulder, I saw the bald-headed Sergeant Roland burst into laughter. His eyes seemed a little red. While he may have looked tough on the outside, he was in fact a very sensitive guy.

Since the mood was exceedingly bright despite our current dangerous situation, I did my best as commander to keep it that way. “He is right. In particular, a certain someone needs to stay alive, or the Church will lose its authority.”

Everyone’s eyes fixated on that certain someone and we all started laughing at once. Except for that certain someone.

All the villagers had been safely evacuated. And there was more good news.

According to the initial report, only a handful of people had returned out of the twenty who had entered the forest, but it turned out that later some more people had returned here and there. Eleven villagers had found their way back after initially getting lost due to confusion as they were being chased by the treants. They were earnest workers who had put effort into their farm work and shown a spirit of solidarity. It appeared that, even as they had been chased by the treants, they had made sure to run away in smaller groups. In a desperate situation, where they had been attacked by demons in an unfamiliar forest, they had managed to survive by encouraging each other and sharing their wisdom.

Among them were several ambitious villagers who had learned the fundamentals of tracking in the woods by accompanying Glen whenever he foraged the forest in an attempt to increase the village's food supplies—even if only by a little bit—on his trips as a messenger. Those skills had significantly increased their survival rate. Most likely it was also thanks to them running around the forest that the treants' attack on the village had been delayed. Some god must have been watching over Glen's single-minded devotion.

“This is a high achievement, Glen.”

“Not at all. It's all thanks to you.”

“Do not be absurd! It is thanks to your effort to help the village even further while you were already busy carrying out the difficult task of being the messenger.”

Thanks to Glen, most of my precious personnel had made it back. He could not imagine how happy I was.

Glen just smiled and scratched his head. “I just did as I should, helping wherever I could, as you said. Without you, I wouldn't have known my way around the forest or even looked for something that I could do on my own to help. You really live up to the name of ‘Phoenix,’ Ash.”

Glen was humble, emphasizing that he still had a long way to go. What a truly nice guy. Even after a great achievement, he still held an invigorating desire to improve himself.

Encouraged by the good news, the combat squad started to take up their

battle positions. Since relentless pursuit was in the treants' nature, I wanted to repel them here if possible. It was easy to outrun them with the horse carriages, but it also meant trouble if they followed us all the way to the city. While Itsutsu city had sturdy stone walls, it was not unheard for a city like that to fall to a group of demons.

It would have been even worse if those treants decided to spearhead an attack on Adele village. Itsutsu city had the best defenses in the whole territory, but Adele did not. The abundant village would be at risk of annihilation. Therefore, we were going to engage the treants here, so that they would see the combat squad as their top-priority targets. And ideally, we were going to exterminate them all.

"Come to think of it, was it the treants' fault that the forest seemed so strange?" Glen murmured next to me as he wiped the sweat off his forehead.

"Most likely, yes. The treants must have chased away the larger animals and some of those ended up attacking Adele village. That would make sense."

"What a mess."

"Indeed."

While we were digging holes, the people around us destroyed some of the private houses and used the scrap wood to build simple walls. I was a bit worried, since none of them were real military engineers, but even their DIY constructs should give some protection. Regardless, even if they did not hold, we still had our secret weapon from Mr. Quid—the spirit lamp. It may not have served its original purpose, but unexpectedly, the spirit lamp may end up being our savior. I did not know how I could thank Mr. Quid for this. *I'll try developing a promising new product for him.*

Not knowing when the treants would attack, we silently prepared for battle. Suddenly, one of the guards who had been watching the forest rushed over with a sense of urgency on his face. Everyone knew what he was going to say. They knew it, but still fell silent and looked at him to hear the words spoken.

"We spotted treants inside the forest. They are heading towards us. I could make out eight of them with my bare eyes."

Some of my tension released when I heard that their numbers were not in the double digits, although that was not certain yet. Eight was only the number of those who had been spotted currently. There may have been more of them deeper inside the forest—I needed to stay alert. Even eight treants did not equal an easy victory. I looked up at the red sky. Dusk was falling.

“How long will it take them to get here?”

“At their current speed, it will probably be one hour until they get here.”

“So after sunset then.”

That was a disadvantage for us humans who did not function as well in the dark. I wondered what it was like for the treants. Were they active at night? And what senses did they use to track down the villagers? Did they follow their footprints? Or their scent? Either way, a feat like that required highly precise sensory organs. For now, it was better to assume that they could freely move at night.

“Prepare the torches and fire arrows. If possible, set up the torches at regular intervals on the treants’ path. That way we can infer the distance even in the dark.”

As long as I had a sense of distance, I could show off my abilities. Ever since the fight with the werewolf, my five senses had sharpened.

“We will shoot the fire arrows at the treants to mark them.”

In response to my command, barrels with Quid’s company seal—the phoenix seal to be accurate—were unloaded off the wagons. The barrels were filled with pitch, a tarry substance that could be extracted by fractionally distilling tar. It was highly flammable, perfect for torches and our fire arrows.

The pitch barrels rolled up one next to the other. Mr. Quid’s company had saved them up as by-products from their spirit-lamp fuel production and provided them to us now. Later on, I was supposed to pay him back from the regional military budget. I already felt alarmed about how much it was going to be.

What to do? It gave me a headache as a member of Sir George’s staff, which was in charge of the military budget. In addition, I had also brought leftover

porcelain bottles from the laboratory and the Quid company. And while they were leftovers, they were still somewhat pricey, intensifying my headache even further. *This is no good.* I was putting too much pressure on the territory's finances. I had to either restrain myself a bit more or come up with a new money-making scheme. If only I had more money.

As I was caught up in my human greed for money, which seemed to exist no matter the world, Ajole village had been wrapped up in the mantle of night. From the other side—from the depths of the dark, gloomy forest—reverberated heavy footsteps.

“Oh, what impressive marching music.”

The timbre stimulated my imagination to such a degree that I found myself unconsciously impressed. Several low frequencies were creeping up from the depths of the night. No shapes could be seen, but the marching sounds signaling their imminent approach were like a tune designed to instigate fear.

It had been the right call to evacuate the villagers. If we had needed to protect the villagers amidst this sound, it would have probably required all our concentration to calm down their panic. Luckily, everyone present was a guard or knight—they were not only professional fighters here in this world, but also well versed in dealing with demons. While they may still have been scared, none of them were so weak that they would have been consumed by their fears.

I turned to them with a smile. “Once we get back to the city, we need to tell the playwrights and bards about this marching tune. It is so impressive that I would love to hear it re-enacted on a stage.”

From a small turret attached to one of the houses, I surveyed the combat squad. Some of them stood on a turret similar to mine with their bows readied, and others were in the shade of their bulwarks made of scrap wood. They looked up at me as if they had seen the sun rise in the middle of the night. That was not exactly the reaction that I had expected.

“Hey, sounds like our commander's already thinking about our triumphant return.”

“He's got to be pretty confident in his plan.”

“Obviously. Our adjutant’s a child prodigy who earned himself the nickname ‘Phoenix.’”

“You guys from the patrol squad may have only seen him do farm work, but don’t underestimate him. Our Sir Adjutant is a werewolf slayer who earned the silver battle medal.”

Upon hearing the praise from Sir George’s troops, the patrol squad voiced their admiration.

I didn’t kill the werewolf though.

Ignoring my attempt to correct them, everyone started chatting in a cheerful mood.

“Now that you mention it, our commander is the Phoenix, Ash.”

“I completely forgot after seeing his splendid work in the fields.”

“On that subject, the villagers who were attacked by the treants also managed to come back alive in the end. That must have been thanks to the power of the phoenix.”

Definitely not. Such a power doesn’t exist.

“We’ve got to fight with all we have.”

“Agreed. The bards will sing about us! We can’t do anything that’ll make us look bad.”

“And they may even write a play! We’ll be so popular at the tavern.”

There was another uproar. I did not really know what was going on, and it seemed full of misunderstandings, but it appeared that their morale had jumped through the roof. It seemed that the professional fighters had been more nervous than anticipated. *My bad for not noticing.*

Maybe I was just too optimistic. Even if we failed, we could still become a decoy as long as we made contact with the treants. Then we could pull them away and wait for reinforcements from the city.

At the moment, they were preparing two types of reinforcements in the city. The first one was the final line of defense for the city and the second one was a

strike force that would try and eliminate the threat before it could even reach the city. Of course, it would be much more convenient if we managed to repel them here. However, that was pretty much impossible—at least according to Sir George and Lord Itsuki. They told us not to do anything rash and come back after buying some time.

For the time being, I was going to attempt my strategy. I gave a signal to the archers standing on the turrets and picked up a fire arrow myself. The giants clad in wooden armor had already come within shooting range. This was my first time seeing a treant. They were huge and extremely bulky. They looked less like a monkey or a gorilla in armor and more like a figure in a powered exoskeleton straight out of a science-fiction movie.

The tree armor did not look like planks that had been artificially assembled together but more like branches and roots entangled around the flesh. If I had not known what was inside, I probably would have assumed that it was a walking tree. Their movements were as slow as I had heard, making them easy targets for our arrows.

Since my physique had improved, I had become able to use a fairly strong bow. Straining my back, I drew the bowstring to its limit before releasing it again. When the arrow struck its target, it appeared to be floating midair, since the treant's figure was concealed by the darkness of the night.

"They really are an easy target."

The floating arrow started moving again ever so slowly, in tandem with the treant's head.

"All right, keep shooting them."

As I readied my next arrow, the other archers also took several shots in succession. Some of their arrows missed or did not properly get stuck, but since our targets were bulky giant creatures, most of them hit. Eventually, the treants' entire bodies caught on fire, making their movements visible in the dark. There were indeed just eight of them, just as the guard had reported. Just in case, I still paid attention to our surroundings, but I was not able to see any other treants.

"Looks like we will be fighting eight of them. Time to start the operation."

I whistled with my fingers to signal the end of our fire-arrow assault. Now it was time to intercept the treants near the village entrance. The following step was crucial to the success of our operation, so depending on the outcome, I may end up sounding the retreat whistle. Even I started to feel a bit nervous.

The treants' vanguard walked towards the lowest wall. It was not clear whether it was intentionally aiming at a weak spot or if it was just instinctively drawn towards an area where people had gathered. Considering that the treants were marching in a column, which was not exactly a formation suited for battle, it was most likely the latter. Although that may have just been wishful thinking on my part.

Wondering which explanation applied, I followed their movements. They were probably coming after me. To make sure of it, I shot another fire arrow to lead them towards me. I was not sure how effective this was, but the treants' vanguard was about five steps away from trampling me, so it must have done something.

The treants moved forward to close in on me—and fell over. Yes, they fell. Just like anyone would have if their sluggish feet suddenly got caught up in logs rolling in from the side. Even a treant was not safe from falling logs. As a cloud of dust rose up together with a loud bang, the men who had fulfilled their mission hastily fell back. From the sides, those brave men had upended wagons loaded with logs, effectively making the treants fall over. I called it “treant on the logs.”

Although I said logs, they were essentially just central pillars pulled from the village's disassembled houses. The central pillars and the wagons had been turned upside down by the giants' fall, but they had fulfilled their role. For a moment, it felt as if the pillars—which had supported the houses over many long years—showed some resentment. Must have been my imagination.

In any case, I ran up to the treant that had fallen face first until I got close enough to throw a porcelain bottle at it without missing. This porcelain bottle was filled with pitch, and the old cloth stuck in its opening was on fire. As you may have already guessed, I was about to throw a Molotov cocktail. If this operation went smoothly maybe I could rename it the “treant cocktail.”

Several guards with the same task followed my lead and energetically threw their Molotov cocktails at its head. It was a guilty pleasure to listen to the sound of the bottles breaking as the treant's head caught on fire. As expected, it went up in flames. On the outside, the treants looked like trees, so it was only natural to attack with fire weapons when considering their possible weaknesses. *Especially as far as traditional fantasy settings go.*

However, even if they looked like trees, they were living organisms—they were not going to burn as easily as dried wood. I wondered how long it was going to take for them to turn into charcoal. Therefore, the Molotov cocktail's goal was not to kill them by burning them alive. This operation focused on the treants' heads as their weak points, and the brain was the most important organ inside the head. I assumed that once you destroyed their brains, they would die. There should not have been any organisms that could survive without their brains, but Sir Werewolf had proven that that was not necessarily true.

Be that as it may, when it came to the parasitic treant, who lived thanks to the corpses of animals, they should have died once their host's brain was destroyed. Or at least they were going to be incapacitated. Still, how could I destroy the brain? It was not possible to carry a ballista all the way here. There was no telling how much damage small impacts from axes and spears could do. Therefore, I decided to rely on fire.

Fire burned through consuming oxygen from its surroundings. In other words, it deprived its surroundings of oxygen. What happened if you covered the treants' heads in fire? It would cut off the oxygen supply to any organism breathing inside that head. And if it ran out of oxygen, the organism was going to suffocate. Yes, my goal was to asphyxiate the treants with fire. Although, I had no idea how they preserved the corpse's brain, so I was not too confident of my plan's success. It would not have been strange at all if they did not need any oxygen. They were demons after all. However, since records stated that treants could be defeated by destroying the head, there must have been some physical limits related to its host body. Or were there?

While I was observing the treant whose head was in flames in front of my eyes, it silently stood up without any groans or other signs of struggle. What an

unfortunate result. However, just as I was considering retreat, the treant that had sluggishly raised its upper body fell over once again. This time it seemed to stop moving altogether.

“Did we succeed?”

Just in case, I needed to experiment on a second specimen. *Time for our second treant on the logs.* With a thump, the second treant fell over abruptly and suffered a concentrated assault of Molotov cocktails. It was probably safe to assume that they were not particularly intelligent. Their movements were slow, and their mindless pursuit of their prey resembled a zombie. Come to think of it, zombies and the undead were also weak to fire. My mind was preoccupied with trivial thoughts as we turned the second treant’s head into a ball of flames.

In conclusion, treants were weak to fire. *Good, I can work with that.* The log-and-Molotov combo allowed us to keep our blockade intact up until the third treant, but in the meantime the other treants had steadily advanced, reaching our improvised bulwark. While I had hoped that it would slow them down a little bit in their tracks, the treants demonstrated superhuman strength in complete contrast to their dull movements. They destroyed the bulwarks as they pushed on with sluggish momentum.

“They are stronger than expected. We need to abandon the first encampment!”

I started worrying about the rest of the operation. On my whistling signal, the combat squad abandoned all unnecessary equipment and retreated towards the other side of the village. They were followed by the sound of the treants’ heavy footsteps. While their path was mostly lit up by torches placed in advance, it was also dotted with dark areas from the demolished houses’ scrap wood. Anxious to find out if anyone was hurt, I hurried towards the rendezvous point.

“Is everyone safe? No one hurt or missing?”

While keeping an eye on the treants, Sergeant Roland performed a roll call before replying with a delighted look on his face. “No one is missing, sir. Several people were slightly injured by the bulwark’s splinters, but otherwise everyone

is fine.”

“I am relieved to hear that. Thank you for your concise report.”

“Yes, sir. You can count on me. This is easier than inspecting the warehouse.”
After all, unlike the equipment, the soldiers replied when you called their name.

Now then, it was time for the operation’s second and final phase. Due to time and resource constraints, I had been unable to come up with anything more intricate.

“From here on out, we are going to split up. Do you all remember your pairs? Does everyone have a torch? And do you remember the final rendezvous point?”

The troops took out their torches and clearly affirmed my questions. They really were very reliable professional fighters.

“One last thing. Do not do anything reckless just to complete the mission. We are not cornered, and this is not a do-or-die operation. The villagers have already been escorted to safety, so there is no point in fighting to the death. This is just a little bonus mission.”

Even if we failed, we just had to skirmish with the treants and lead them in front of the city’s ballistae. Sir George should have already been preparing for that unlikely scenario.

“Please remember that your lives are more important than this bonus mission’s success. You are all exceptionally talented people. Are you ready?”

The professional fighters all replied with an enthusiastic “yes” before forming pairs and moving to their positions.

“Ash, you’re really great at dealing with people.” My partner, Glen, smiled with a torch in his hand.

“You think so?”

“Your speech just now easily relieved their tension from the destroyed bulwark.”

“They were nervous? It may have been a bit early, but it was expected that the bulwark would fall. Everything is going according to plan.”

“Still, it’s a bit scary... Although you seem fine.”

“I mean, we can always just run away if things go wrong.”

It was important to have a reliable backup. As such, a tactical victory could never upset a strategic victory.

“Are you ready to go, Glen?”

“Yes, let’s brace ourselves.”

The treants had pursued us all the way to the center of the village square. With steps larger yet also clumsier than human ones, they followed the soldiers that were scattered all over the square, ignoring the paths indicated by the torches. Or rather, they tried to follow them but failed. Away from the well-lit paths, it was extremely difficult for them to get a foothold due to piles of jumbled scrap wood and dug-up holes. The treants’ sluggish movements grew even duller until they fell over.

At the same time, the dispersed troops laughed at the confused treants while lighting up the piles of scrap wood and ditches filled with pitch surrounding them. In a chain reaction, the burning red flames spread from the center to the outer edges. Eventually, the fire reached the bulwarks surrounding the village square and imprisoned the slow-footed treants inside a ring of fire. *I’m sorry to have kept you waiting. Here is the fire attack you ordered.*

It was an orthodox plan. First, using a disposable site as our encampment, we had lured in the enemy by pretending to be overwhelmed. Then we ignited the combustible material we had set all over the site beforehand, catching the whole herd with one move. Even I could carry out a foolproof plan like that. For the rest, the combat squad just had to meet up at the rendezvous point and observe how efficient the fire was.

While we had made sure that it would burn well, the fire was now raging to a degree where you could feel the heat even at our meeting point further away. The plan had aimed to suffocate the treants to death, but this heat may have been able to just burn them down. Maybe we had used a little too much fuel. Still, better than failing, just a very expensive lifesaver. *I really need to make some more money.*

“The fire is burning nicely.”

I wondered how long it was going to continue. And how much of the treants' corpses were going to remain. If possible, I wanted to recover them and study the demons' biology.

As I was overcome with the looming feeling that we might have to stay here until the morning, a black shadow jumped out of the flames. It was keen and nimble, quite unlike the treants. Charging towards us, the clearly hostile creature interrupted our break.

“Everyone, disperse!”

While giving out orders, I shot an arrow with my bow. Despite the target's speed, my arrow hit its head. However, my skill was impeccable but meaningless. The mysterious shadow did not even flinch and raised its arms ready to thrust.

“Ash!”

This must have been Glen calling my name. I lightly waved my bow to let him know that I had dodged the attack. Still, rather than letting him know that I was safe, I was busy trying to figure out our enemy's identity. The flames' backlight had concealed it from my sight, but I slowly started seeing it. Its bulky, muscular body was hideously burnt, but you could see remains of black hair. Its head—from which my arrow protruded—was wrapped in a scorched wooden helmet.

“Oh? Is this by any chance a treant's inside?”

It was still possible that this was a gorilla-shaped something that had escaped the fire, but the wooden helmet immediately made me think it was related to the treants. It was unlikely that any wild animal had been accidentally caught up inside the fire ring. It made more sense to think of it as a treant that had become nimbler after taking off its wooden body armor.

As I pondered its identity, it released a war cry from inside its helmet before charging at me again.

“You are fast!”

I evaded its bludgeon-like arms while throwing away my bow and drawing my

sword. Its incredible speed made it hard to believe that this was the same treant that had moved slower than a turtle just moments ago. How heavy was its wooden exoskeleton? Was it like a training weight?

While its repeated arm swings were fast and could have easily ended the fight with a single blow, its large size made it easy to predict the trajectory. As Lady Maika's practice partner, I could not possibly let myself get hit by such an obvious attack pattern. Initially, I was surprised when the presumed treant had jumped out of the flames, but it seemed like I could manage the situation.

After evading one of its side blows, I stepped forward and slashed its feet. I had intended for everyone to gang up on it once it fell over, but the presumed treant prevented its fall by pushing its arms against the ground. Not only that, it also turned around and launched another attack together with a war cry.

"You really have become quick and agile." And learned how to roar. The treants earlier didn't do that either.

Its unforgiving wild instincts were the complete opposite of its earlier mindless, zombie-like movements. Maybe its limiter had been removed after purging itself of its armor. Come to think of it, none of the other treants smelled like putrefaction either, despite carrying around corpses. Maybe the wooden mantle that appeared like an armor or exoskeleton actually was a storage container for preserving corpses. Rather than its movements being slow due to its weight, it may have been intentionally conserving energy. *Extremely interesting. Now if only my life weren't in danger.* According to my past-life memories, similar medical technology had existed in my previous life. A life-prolonging nanomachine that was used to treat progressive diseases.

I slashed its limbs multiple times while the other members of the unit backed me up by hitting it with their spears and swords from all sides, but the presumed treant did not seem to mind at all. It barely bled and did not seem to feel any pain, which may just have been its inherent traits as a corpse. We made no progress by slightly grazing its thick skin. We needed to go for the head. However, that head was well-protected by a wooden helmet. Since we had no Molotov cocktails left, we had to rely on our spears and swords to destroy it. If only we had a chainsaw. But there was no use in lamenting the lack of a tool that did not yet exist. I had to make up for life's inconveniences by taking a risk.

“I will somehow make it fall over. Once there is an opening, bash in its head!”

I waited for the right timing while evading the presumed treant’s stout arms. It had already been established that I could not bring it down with a shallow slash, so I had to get in a strong blow. Naturally that required a large swing and stable footing, which made it difficult to evade any counterattacks... *Maybe I should just let it go after all.* There was no need to court danger.

Just when I was ready to retreat, the presumed treant missed his swing and lost its balance.

“This is my chance.”

As I had not yet officially canceled the operation, I did not lose any time to grasp this much anticipated opportunity and put all my weight into a heavy blow on the enemy’s knees. It was a critical hit that smashed the presumed treant’s knees into bits and pieces. Unfortunately, my feeling of accomplishment was immediately followed by regret. As I had feared, the presumed treant did not have any sense of pain and did not seem to mind his knee injury. It propped its upper body up with its left hand while going for a full swing with the right one.

“Oh, whoa!”

I did not manage to get out of the way in time. I crossed my arms in defense and ducked under the presumed treant. I managed to evade a direct blow from his strong arm, but in return it clotheslined me. I was lying on the ground. The fight had been going on for so long that I was starting to break out into a cold sweat. After being thrown on the ground, I somehow rolled over. I assumed a defensive position and looked out for the enemy—it apparently had fallen over. That was no surprise considering that it had carried out a full swing with broken knees. *Everything’s going according to plan. Although my right arm and torso creaked, and I’m covered in cold sweat! And I’m in terrible pain!*

“Aim for the head!”

I squeezed out a command while striking the ground to suppress my pain. On my cue, all those fighters who always boasted of their own strength threw themselves headfirst onto the presumed treant. From there on, everyone ganged up on it. The presumed treant swung its arms around in resistance, but

its knee injury prevented it from mustering any real strength. It could no longer move properly. Eventually, the troops pinned down its arms, leaving it helpless. At last, their swords swung down upon its head.

Glen held his large sword above his head, then swung it down with full force onto the presumed treant, piercing its cervical vertebrae.

“How’s that!”

In response to Glen’s shout, the enemy’s huge body violently bounced up before presenting some weaker convulsions.

“You’re still not done? How about this, then!” Glen trampled on its head while swinging his sword again.

Before the blade hit, a frail voice sounded from inside the wooden helmet. “Well done...young sapling...” I tilted my head in puzzlement. Unlike its earlier roar, I could understand its words. “Young sapling...I...”

With a muffled sound, Glen’s sword cut off the presumed treant’s head.

“Wai—”

I was curious about what it was trying to say, but even a demon would not have been able to speak without its vocal cords. That was physically impossible. And yet in the next moment, I heard the following words ring inside my ears together with a headache-inducing high-pitched noise.

“Come to me...when the time is ripe...young sapling... I entrust you.”

Why did random fantasy elements keep appearing at the weirdest times? Although it felt more like a horror story when an image of a map with a marked spot suddenly flashed into my mind.

Itsuki’s Perspective

Itsutsu’s city wall had become a symbol of protection for the citizens of Sacula. It was proof that this territory had repelled countless dangers and protected its citizens. I stood atop this city wall, glaring into the direction where Ash and his men had set off for battle. Beside me, a ragged Sacula flag fluttered in the wind. It was yet another symbol. In fact, it was a family heirloom, the so-

called “first generation flag” that the first count had planted into this ground. It represented Sacula’s invincibility and all the hardships it had overcome since the time of the first count. When hoisting this flag, we declared that we weren’t going to back down at all and we were going to win this fight. This connected us to all our ancestors who had lived here.

The sky had become brighter. Dawn was breaking. I wondered what Ash and his men were up to right now. They just had to safely run away. We were fully prepared. The troops led by Baleas must have been midway en route to Ajole village by now, ready to counterattack. No matter how many treants there were, this city wall was not going to fall. It never had until now and it wasn’t going to in the future either. Today would be no exception.

That’s why I beg you, Ash. Don’t do anything reckless.

As I was praying, I saw a horse shrouded in a cloud of dust in the distance. Must have been a messenger. The other guards, who were keeping watch on the city wall, raised their voices. Now we were going to find out what had happened. Since Ash was in charge, nothing too bad could have happened. Nevertheless, I felt a tightness in my throat and had difficulty swallowing my saliva.

Ash was insane. He managed to exterminate eight treants. How crazy is that? I remembered him saying “If it is possible, I will take care of it myself,” before leaving the city behind. We had all admired his figure as he had rode ahead. It was a dashing departure that eased the worries of all those present who saw him off. But some people—Baleas, Rihn, and Yae—had noticed that he was completely serious. And the messenger just earlier relayed the report of the treants’ annihilation in Ash’s words, which were “It was possible, so I took care of it myself.”

It was crazy how from beginning to end Ash didn’t seem to be afraid of death at all. Even the guards that had remained in the city had prepared for the worst and left a will with their families. That was in fact a pretty standard procedure. *I guess I’ll have to give him another silver medal...*

Not that I minded. That was a good thing. It was an unfortunate outcome for

Ajole village, but the villagers were all safe. That alone was already a huge victory and cause for celebration, so I had no problem giving him a medal.

However, it made me extremely sad to think that all my groundwork to confer knighthood upon Ash ended up being useless. Although it was not really my cup of tea, I had socialized with all kinds of people to make sure I could appoint a young farmer boy a knight. But none of that was necessary anymore now that he had taken care of eight treants. Everything would be solved by pointing towards his achievements and saying, “Why not him?”

“I wonder if I’ve done something wrong.” I always paid respect to my ancestors.

Uncharacteristically, my personal maid, Ran, sent me a sympathetic look upon hearing my murmur. Although she seemed to be more focused on the wine in her hand. I couldn’t blame her for prioritizing the celebratory high-grade wine over my consolation. I did so myself, so who was I to judge her?

“Well, let’s look at the positive side. It will be less likely for any unforeseen frictions to arise now,” Ran said.

“Yeah, that sounds good.” *Let’s just say that I didn’t act unreasonably because of my cute niece, but rather that my niece has a good eye for people! Ha ha ha, that didn’t change the fact that my efforts had been useless!*

“More importantly, what are you going to do about that?”

“About what?”

Ran slowly drank her wine while observing the people letting loose at the celebration party. The troops had eliminated eight treants and stayed mostly unharmed. The civil officials and military officers were elated by this sweeping victory’s low costs relative to the serious circumstances. Naturally, their good mood extended towards the person who had rendered distinguished service this time: Ash.

Ah, yes. Come to think of it, Ash graduated from the academy, so he’s reached a good age for marriage.

Ash appeared to be quite popular among the attendees. Several of them were talking about marriage proposals. Well, having two silver medals at his age

already did promise a great future. If I were in their place, I would probably try and make him my son-in-law too.

“This is bad. If I don’t do anything, Maika will go into a rage!” I exclaimed.

“I’m not sure it would stop at that. Sir George mentioned just earlier what a great swordswoman she is.”

Stop it! Don’t look at my neck!

Maika did indeed carry around a sword when she was truly angry, so this was no laughing matter!

“I can’t let Maika get angry, Ran.”

Recently my heart had almost stopped when she had said that she “hated” me! If she had said that she “loathed” me, I probably wouldn’t be able to keep on living as her uncle!

“You are right. You shouldn’t overlook this as the acting count of Sacula.”

Exactly. I was supposed to become the next count after all. If I died, that would end up causing a lot of trouble.

“Especially since Lady Maika might cause an uproar by fighting for Ash in duels... Sir Klein claimed a lot of victims when he fought for Lady Yuika.”

Huh? She’s not worried about me?

Still, she was right. Those duels had caused quite the uproar. The overall casualties may have been low, but that was only thanks to my dear brother-in-law’s skilful restraint. Regardless, many civil and military officers and representatives from other territories had ended up with injuries leaving them incapable of returning to their work. In other words, if I ignored this situation, all kinds of things could go awry.

“Ran, we need to act quickly.”

When I spoke in a serious tone, Ran just took a sip of her wine and nodded, as if to say, “I told you so just earlier.”

“How about you confer knighthood upon Ash and bring up the engagement?” she said.

“That sounds like a plan! But first I’ll have to consult with my father, since it involves my succession line. I have to introduce him to both of them.”

Hopefully my father Gentoh was going to react appropriately. I was pretty confident he was going to like Ash. From his letters, it even appeared that he may have already taken a liking to him. The problem lay with Maika. My father was an overprotective parent who still lamented the fact that my dear brother-in-law Klein had stolen his daughter when he got drunk. I couldn’t predict how he was going to behave when it came to his granddaughter Maika. Although it was probably all right since Maika was so cute. If she fawned him, he would surely give in—just like I always did.

“By the way, where is Maika?”

She wasn’t present at the victory celebration party. Neither was Renge. And Ash was still dealing with the aftermath of the battle, so none of the Territory Reform Promotion Office’s biggest stars were present.

“If you are looking for Maika, she is working. When I told her about the banquet, she just asked to have the food brought to her office.”

“She’s at her office?”

What was she doing there at this time?

“The fight led to Ajole’s destruction.”

“That is indeed unfortunate, but it’s a small sacrifice.”

“I agree. But according to Lady Maika, Ash doesn’t think so.”

Upon hearing that last sentence, it all clicked. It seemed that I had spent enough time with Ash and Maika to intuitively understand what they were thinking.

“So she’s already working on finding a new home for the displaced villagers.”

“Yes. Lady Maika said that that is what Ash would do.”

“He most certainly would.” *It’s Ash after all.*

No politician or bureaucrat would have even batted an eye if Ajole had been left to its own devices. And yet Ash took on and tried to solve that

tremendously difficult task himself. And he did solve it. He just got unlucky at the very end. Ash had the strength to get things done one way or another—he was a genius. Where others gave up because it seemed hopeless, he pushed until the problem was solved. As a result, if he felt like he couldn't leave something alone, then he wasn't going to ignore it. It was hard to imagine how much work this entailed. Having followed part of his journey this past year, I was struck with admiration at how much work he got done himself. And Maika was desperately trying to catch up with him, so she could stay by his side.

“Say, Ran.”

“Yes?”

“Don't you think it'll be impossible for those rookies to win over Ash's heart?”

If my cute Maika had only recently reached a point where she could possibly keep up with Ash, it was going to be near impossible for those people. It was like Maika had said—even if she took over as count of Sacula, there was no guarantee that she could hold a candle to Ash.

“I think you're probably right. However, Lady Maika will still be in a bad mood, so we should prepare for their engagement as soon as possible.”

Keeping Maika in a good mood was indeed important. As important as my own life.

Renge's Perspective

Ash's response team had succeeded in subjugating the treants! It would be common sense to disbelieve that report. Ash's main mission had been to rescue the villagers, then attract the treants' attention and lead them to the city, not to eliminate them as well. But when talking about Ash, common sense didn't apply. Not only had I learned that from Lady Maika, I had also experienced it myself over these past few years.

Renge, if you have time to get flustered over such trivial matters, you should just return to work! That's the way things are done here!

Lady Maika was the embodiment of that work style. She sat at her desk with her arms folded thinking about the way ahead.

“First, we need to find out how many people and households have evacuated Ajole village and prepare temporary accommodations in the city. Then, we’ve got to confirm the damages in Ajole, so we can judge whether they can go back or if they have to move somewhere else...”

“Chief Maika, according to the messenger’s report, the houses were torn down in order to subjugate the treants. Ajole is no longer...”

“Hm. In that case, we have to arrange their migration.”

Lady Maika sighed and frowned. It was tough on a business and emotional level. Suiren must have been devastated too. But I was sure that after her recent growth she was capable of leading everyone. I wanted to help her too.

“It’ll be important to know how much money we can use on Ajole’s villagers,” Lady Maika said.

“Yes, I will ask Ms. Ran to have a look at our budget later so I can calculate how much is available. And maybe we could ask Quid and his fellow merchants for help too.”

“I will bow my head as many times as necessary if that gets us any more help. I should also get my uncle to ask for help.”

Suiren should be able to tell us how many people and households there were later. Then we had to find enough places to house all these people.

“I will ask my father how many he can accommodate in Adele. We should also be able to house some here in the city. And what about your hometown, Noscula village?”

“Of course, they can take on some people! But it’s just a small village, so there’s not enough space for everyone...” She shook her head. That probably applied to most places. “This time around, we’ll probably need to send them to villages all over the place. That may be difficult to accept for the residents of Ajole, but the villages that are supposed to receive them most likely won’t be amused either.”

“Yes, we need to come up with a solution in that regard. Conventionally, the count would provide subsidiary aid to the accommodating village as an incentive,” I replied while referencing past examples from a document that I

had borrowed from the archives.

“It comes back to money again! I don’t think we have that much money to spare!”

“Probably not... I haven’t checked the budget yet, but for the time being we will most likely have to spend the majority on guaranteeing the livelihood of Ajole’s residents.”

“I thought as much. So we’ll have to come up with another method that doesn’t cost any money...”

“If only we could think of any benefits to accommodating the Ajole residents...”

Normally, accepting a refugee was considered an act of mercy. But if there were any benefits attached, you could call it scouting or soliciting.

“What would Ash do...?” Lady Maika murmured. Her face looked as if she had run into a stone wall. “Ash most likely wouldn’t refer to it as accommodating refugees. He would try and sell the idea by saying that accepting these people will bring good fortune to their village!”

In fact, whenever he proposed a plan to Lord Itsuki, Ash always emphasized the positives. He even managed to turn apparent drawbacks into benefits by taking a step back and looking at the bigger picture.

“Ajole’s strengths... Hm, they cooperated for a whole year with our project, but I can’t really think of any...”

Upon hearing my murmur, Lady Maika hit the desk and stood up. “That’s it!”

“Wh-What?”

“You just said it. The Ajole residents helped us carry out the agricultural improvement plan!” Lady Maika exclaimed with a big grin on her face. “They know how to use the newest farming techniques! We can send them all over the place to coach farmers!”

“Chief Maika! That’s it! That’s an amazing idea!”

It sounded like an idea straight from Ash! I stood up and held hands with Lady Maika to express my joy.

“Let’s go with this idea! How should we select the villages?” she asked.

“Should we go by harvest yield? But maybe it’d be better to take into consideration personal relationships. It will be easier to negotiate if they know you or Ash. Like your former classmates from the academy.”

After that eureka moment, my thoughts started running wild. Seeing me blurt out ideas, Lady Maika gave me a smile. Until a moment ago, she had been fixated on our new project, but now she was clearly staring at me.

“You’ve become a lot more reliable, Renge.”

“R-Really?”

“You’ve changed a lot. I mean, you’ve always been reliable, but... Haven’t you noticed? Until just now, you hadn’t stuttered at all.”

I was totally unaware. Surprised, I covered my mouth. W-Was she right? I had been absorbed in my thoughts, so I hadn’t noticed it at all...

“You’ve grown stronger, Renge.”

“S-S-So have you! Y-You just proposed an idea th-that could easily be mistaken f-for Ash’s!”

My face turned red as I spoke. Hearing Lady Maika’s praise, I felt like I had come just a little closer to Ash’s strength.

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One month had passed since the large fire in Ajole village. *The fire I caused.* Since most houses had been completely destroyed, Ajole’s reconstruction was postponed for the time being. It was already fall, and even if we hurried the houses’ construction, it was unlikely we would finish before winter.

Lord Itsuki had explained the situation and sincerely apologized for the troops’ lack of ability to Chief Suiren and the residents of Ajole. In response, Chief Suiren, who had been prepared to completely abandon her village, eloquently expressed her gratitude for the swift evacuation. Personally, I also could not thank them enough for going easy on me despite being the source of most problems.

Therefore, Ajole’s reconstruction was postponed until spring. In the

meanwhile, the villagers needed a new place to live. The residents had been kind enough to forgive me, so it was only natural that I was put in charge of the relocation task. Thus, I set out to find a solution while recovering from the injuries on my right arm and torso.

When Lady Maika and Lady Renge showed up, they both looked like they were going to lecture me at any moment. While it may not have been a huge number of people, we still needed to transplant a whole village. Thankfully, since the village was made up of elite farmers who had learned the newest farming techniques, it was also the perfect opportunity to export those methods to other places. Accidentally, it had turned into a splendid opportunity for our agricultural development plan. I anticipated the relocation to be a huge task, but Lady Maika and Lady Renge had already come up with the basic outline, making it much easier. So much so that I might as well just have left everything up to these two.

As the vanguard of the migration plan that I had drafted with the help of the two girls, I headed towards Adele village. Among the reasons why Adele had been chosen as the first destination spot were the fact that there was a shortage of workers, as well as the fact that it was a convenient location for Ajole residents with a lingering attachment to their birthplace. In addition, one of the plan's architects saw it as an opportunity to take care of a hitherto postponed problem.

"Ash, it has been a while." Chief Marco greeted me as I arrived at the village with the immigrants.

"It is good to see you, Chief Marco. Thank you very much for so readily agreeing to our proposal."

"Don't mention it. Besides, it will also be extremely helpful for us, so I should be the one thanking you." Chief Marco gently smiled before looking at the nervous Chief Suiren. "Please make yourself at home, Suiren."

"Th-Thank you! Um... Thank you so much for everything you've done for us so far, including this."

It appeared that Chief Suiren, who had taken a deep bow, was not yet

finished expressing her gratitude for Adele's past favors. However, she was interrupted by a problem that needed urgent attention.

"If it isn't Suiren! And Ash."

The former village chief—the parasitic god of plague—entered the scene, shamelessly pretending that he had been worried. Oozing fake tears over his frail-looking face, he grasped Chief Suiren's hand.

"Suiren, we owe it to you for seeking help from Itsutsu city. Thanks to you, all the other villagers managed to safely escape. Well done. I am proud both as your father and the village chief."

How amazing. He still considered himself to be in charge. He did not even feel the need to apologize for leaving the village before anyone else without giving any concrete orders. And he somehow managed to make Chief Suiren's courageous trip to the city about himself as a parent.

"No, Dad. There's something important I need to tell you..."

"What are you talking about? Nothing makes me happier than seeing my one and only daughter grow up."

"This isn't the right time, dad..."

His daughter, who had already become an infinitely better village chief than him, was visibly perplexed by his shameless behavior. He was still her father after all, even if he was a parasite. As his daughter, it must have been difficult to clearly state the facts.

While taking out the legal documents that had multiplied over the past month, I tapped on Lady Suiren's shoulder to let her know I was going to take over. She looked at her father with sadness in her eyes before bowing her head and leaving the rest to me.

"I will take care of it. This is part of my job after all. Chief Marco, could you please discuss the details of the immigration with Chief Suiren?"

There was no need for her to witness the rest. Chief Marco seemed to agree as he nodded and led Chief Suiren to his house. The only one who did not know what was going on was the former village chief, Louis.

“Did you just call Suiren ‘chief,’ Ash? I did pick her as my representative, but that was already a while ago—”

“Former Chief Louis.” I made the parasite, who was talking without permission, clearly aware of his current position. “I am finally able to tell you face to face. In the name of the acting count, I issue you a summons. Please surrender and follow us back to the city,” I declared while presenting former Chief Louis with the bundle of written decrees.

“A s-summons? Why would I... And why do you call me ‘former chief’?! I was appointed chief of Ajole by His Excellency the count himself!”

“Please choose your words carefully. You are the *former* village chief. If you keep calling yourself village chief after reading this document, you may end up getting accused of identity fraud and deceiving the public.” *Watch out. I’ll be the first one to accuse you.*

“Y-You insolent brat! A-Are you threatening me?”

“What a harsh reply to my kind advice. It is also written here on this document.”

The first decree was a note that temporarily released the man called Louis of his duties as the village chief of Ajole due to doubts in his ability to carry out his job and requested his presence for questioning. At the same time, it appointed his daughter Lady Suiren as the new provisional village chief. In other words, Lady Suiren had officially been the village chief for the past month, albeit still provisionally.

“I-It can’t be! Who doubts my abilities?!”

Come on, don’t play dumb. Not only had he overseen bad harvests for the past twenty years, but he had also wholesale delegated his job to a representative for a whole year due to a fake sickness.

“The second decree orders you to cooperate with an investigation into a suspected neglect of duty during your time as village chief. And the third one is a summons for a perceived abuse of authority.” *Take this triple strike of summons!*

“Wh-Wha—! What a load of rubbish! Why do you have those letters?”

“The Territory Reform Promotion Office works directly under the acting count, so he often entrusts us with extra tasks like this. Besides, I am also affiliated with the military.” I was the perfect candidate to double as a police officer and guide for Ajole’s refugees. “And there is more. The fourth decree states that you are suspected of intentionally trying to leak information classified as confidential by the count himself.”

That was the fourth summons.

“Th-That’s... I didn’t mean that. You know that, right?”

I had heard it with my own ears. *I’m not going to let you make any excuses.*

“This would also be considered treason, which is a grave crime. When the acting count Lord Itsuki heard my report, he was eager to hear your objection so he could reach a conclusion.”

So much so that he had already written a guilty verdict and detailed the possible punishment. The first four decrees were parasite pesticide that Lord Itsuki had prepared a month ago. If it had not been for the treants’ appearance, I would have just apprehended Louis—who was still village chief at that point—during a food supply run to Ajole village, but some time had passed since then. And it appeared that a little more time was going to pass before I could come to my final point.

The former village chief’s pale face turned bright red as he started to rant and rave. “Who’s this a-acting count?! I-I was directly appointed by His Excellency the count himself! As if someone could dispose of me on his behalf!”

“Well, His Excellency the count has bestowed his authority upon the acting count as his representative. Moreover, you very haughtily claim to have been directly appointed, but did you not just inherit the title as your predecessor’s eldest son? His Excellency the count merely ratified it—or, I should say, gave his tacit approval.”

I did not think this was going to have any effect. After all, he was the kind of illogical person that just overturned a contract signed by the acting village chief.

“I don’t care! If you want me to listen, bring the count here! I won’t talk to a brat like you!”

“I am afraid I will not be able to bring along His Excellency the count, who is currently in the royal capital.”

“Then leave, you stupid brat!”

“However, I do have a written order from His Excellency the count.”

Over the past month, word of this parasite’s acts had made it to the capital. Apparently, His Excellency the count had been extremely concerned by the circumstances, so much so that he had sent a response by post-horse. In his letter, he apologized for his bad judgment in appointing that infamous person as village chief. He had also enclosed a decree that essentially ordered us to get rid of him right away.

“The fifth decree is an arrest warrant written by His Excellency the count himself. You are accused of malfeasance for neglecting your responsibilities as village chief and abandoning the villagers whom you swore to protect.”

It was a five-strike combo instakill. This last decree skipped over any trials and immediately proclaimed him guilty as charged. Up until the fourth one, the parasite had only been treated as a suspect, but over the past month he had become a convicted criminal. The count’s almost dictator-like authority was scary.

“If you disobey this decree, you will be charged with treason, no questions asked.” While thinking how scary this was, I smiled at the criminal in front of me. “If you allow me to state my personal opinion, I would love to see you disobey.” *I want to charge you with treason. That’ll save us time listening to your poor excuses.*

Unfortunately, the former village chief and small-time crook Louis’s knees gave up out of fear of being accused of treason and he collapsed. What a shame!

A Certain Compiler's Afterword

Thank you for picking up this book. Thanks to all of you, I was able to release the fourth volume of *Fushi no Kami*'s compiled version. In addition—as it was already announced on the bellyband for volume three—a manga version will come out soon. I would like to once again express my gratitude for everyone involved in the publishing of this work. Thank you all so much.

Now then, if my sightseeing report goes smoothly, this should be a real treat.

This time I've come to visit Adele, also known as the green city. Its main attraction is undoubtedly the vast green space that includes the former Ajole village. The green tract of land close to the city is home to the Ajole Agricultural Research Institute. Formerly, it was only a single division under the Territory Reform Promotion Office. Now it has become so big that it is not only flooded with training and research requests from research institutions and related organizations from many nations, but it's also turned into a tourist attraction for people visiting Adele city. When I was at university, I remember my friend at the department of agriculture getting all excited about their seminar trip to the Ajole Agricultural Research Institute.

It is widely known that the agricultural division's origins lay with Ash's experiments in a garden in the corner of the academy's dormitory, but it should also be noted that it only became this big through the strenuous efforts of its first division chief, Mrs. Suiren.

The Agricultural Research Institute's archive displays many thank-you letters sent to this sacred place from all over the world and from every time period. The tanned staff member who showed me around appeared very proud of that fact. He referred to the huge research institute as "our field." According to him, "Our fields aren't just in Adele city. All the agricultural organizations and businesses, all the agricultural students, all the individuals who trained here... Everyone who sympathizes with our ideals and owns land—their fields are also our fields."

The numerous thank-you letters told stories of famine-stricken areas that had been saved by food aid from their fields. And they don't just supply food, they also provide stored seeds and suggest suitable farming methods. This willingness to offer long-term assistance stems from the institute's own beginnings. "Just like our founders were helped in getting back onto their feet, we help anyone who suffers from hunger," the employee proudly proclaimed.

Apparently, the employee's home area also benefited from their fields in the past. "There are many people in my hometown that feel indebted to our fields. Those who have gone on to become successful, like company presidents, donate every year through the Renge Foundation. Although they personally call it "tax planning," he told me.

That's another famous name he mentioned there! The foundation is said to originate from Mrs. Renge's efforts to organize the various donations from influential people—such as local aristocrats or the Quid company—during her time at the Territory Reform Promotion Office. It appears that even now the two best friends continue to support each other.

"Now, don't just stare at the documents here. You've got to make sure you cover the most important things too," the employee lectured me as he showed me the way from the laboratory to the staff cafeteria. "All the vegetables here come from our fields. Eat to your heart's content!"

—Written while eating a large, multicolored assortment of vegetables.

Mizuumi Amakawa

Illustrator:

Mai Okuma



Fushi no Kami 4

REBUILDING CIVILIZATION

STARTS WITH A VILLAGE



《 RENGÉ 》

《 ASH 》

《 MAIKA 》

“C-Couldn’t
we repurpose
it as aid
for the areas
suffering
from bad
harvests?”



*“Right now,
we can survive
on our own even
if we leave this
village.”*

*“That’s why
I am ordering
you as Ajole’s chief
to get ready to leave
this village behind!”*

《 SUIREN 》

Bonus Short Stories

Suiren's Teacher

It may be a bit too late now, but, while I didn't feel like I was unprepared to be the chief of Ajole village, I was objectively lacking in knowledge and etiquette. Normally, I should have learned these things at the military academy, but alas, I hadn't been able to go. Fortunately, there was another place of learning for people like me—the Church. Thanks to Maika and Ash's recommendation I was able to study under Yae, who was also a teacher at the academy.

"Now then, let's continue reading from the scripture today!"

Even though I was a woman, I was captivated by Yae's beauty. Whenever she taught me, she was always so calm and her movements were so elegant. She was revered by all the other priests as a reliable and accomplished woman. No wonder men fell for women like her—I admired her too.

"How about we start with this passage right here? 'Thus, the monkey god spoke: "Wisdom brings forth beauty,"'" Yae read aloud.

"Mmh... Let's see. Uhm... That's very deep, right?"

I hadn't heard this one before. I had no idea what it could have meant, so I just tried to say something that sounded smart.

However, Yae shook her head with a smile. "If you don't know, just say so—that's the rule here. Besides, you'll need a better poker face if you want to fool me."

She was lecturing on multiple levels at the same time. *I'll just surrender quietly.*

"I'm sorry. I don't know what it means."

"Let me start by explaining, then. You need knowledge to produce good and beautiful things, exactly as stated. Or alternatively, some interpret it as saying

that you need knowledge to appreciate beautiful things.”

I guess that makes sense. Although, not really...

As I tilted my head in confusion, Yae rested her elegant chin on her fingers and started thinking out loud. “Hmm... For example, I don’t know what’s so great about the Territory Reform Promotion Office’s wheat fields.”

“What?! But those fields are amazing! The orderly ridges, the equal separation between plants, and the uniform height of the wheat when it’s grown! Just thinking about how much effort those require makes me admire their fields!”

“That’s exactly what I mean. Since I don’t know anything about farming, I can’t appreciate its beauty either. Conversely, you do admire them because you are knowledgeable when it comes to farming.”

I think I get it now! It was true that you needed to know some things first in order to value the subject. The scripture passage started to make sense.

As expected from a priest teaching at the academy, she was really good at explaining. Whenever I studied by myself, I threw in the towel after not even half a day. Yae just kept looking cooler and more beautiful in my eyes. Actually, this may have been another instance of “wisdom bringing forth beauty!” *If I keep studying, someday I might look as beautiful as Yae! For Glen’s sake and for my own future, I have to give it my all!*

Just as I had strengthened my resolve, someone knocked on the door.

Surprised, Yae tilted her head and replied, “Yes, who is it?”

“It’s George Baleas. I would like to confirm something with you, Mother Yae.”

“I’ll be there right away, Baleas! Suiren, please excuse me for a moment.”

Yae fixed her hair, straightened her collar, and smoothed the wrinkles of her priest’s gown. The mature, beautiful woman had suddenly reverted to being a young teenage girl.

Wondering who had knocked, my gaze followed Yae as she rushed to open the door. On the other side stood a virile man in knight’s armor. *How handsome! As expected from a knight.* He looked a bit like Ash with his red hair.

However, unlike Ash—who appeared gentle on the outside—this man gave a pointed look and an intimidating air. His expression and movements were probably closer to Glen's.

Captivated by the knight, I hadn't realized that their conversation had already finished. Before leaving, the knight greeted me with a courteous bow. Yae looked cute as she reluctantly waved him goodbye.

"Yae, who was that?"

"My apologies. That was Sir George. Lord Itsuki trusts him with his life. He's a relative of your friend Ash."

That makes sense. No wonder they looked alike. But what I want to know is...
"Are you two dating?"

"What? Dating? D-Does it look like that?"

It was mainly Yae's behavior that had made me think that they were a couple. Despite her awkward demeanor, she was grinning from ear to ear. It didn't seem like she wanted to hide her feelings. On the contrary, it seemed like she wanted to tell someone.

"Uhm... Well... As a matter of fact, you could say we are a couple... We're thinking of telling His Excellency the count and making it official in the near future."

The usually very rigid Yae suddenly appeared dreamy. *Wow! What a cute expression! It must be a love match, then!*

"Congratulations, Yae!"

"Thank you. Sorry for interrupting our class to talk about my private life." Yae smiled with a happy yet embarrassed look on her red face. "I know I should keep it to myself, but my love was unrequited for so many years... Recently I decided to suppress my feelings no longer."

"I don't mind at all! I'd love to hear more! In fact, there is this young knight in training..."

It was embarrassing, but I felt comfortable telling Yae. I needed some love advice!

“Do you like him?” Yae asked.

“Yes... So I was wondering what kind of stuff you talk about with Sir George and what he might like...”

“I know exactly what you mean! Leave it to me!” Yae had a broad grin on her face. She no longer looked at me as her pupil but rather as a fellow young girl in love. “I also had some help in getting closer to Baleas. I’ll teach you what I know on the subject of love.”

“Thank you, Miss Yae!”

“Heh heh. This will make you the second student I teach about love. First, let’s start with the most important lesson.” I sat up straight and honed my senses as I awaited my teacher’s first lesson. “Love is war. If you make a mistake, you will be left for dead! You need to be the last one standing no matter what happens and no matter how difficult it may be! A maiden in love doesn’t know defeat!”

“Y-Yes!”

What?! Was that statement something a cute maiden in love should agree with?!

Reina’s Last Stand

“We’ve got an emergency!” Maika exclaimed with an intense look on her face as she stormed into the lab.

I was surprised to see her this serious. Usually, Chief Maika let her charm shine through and appeared slightly playful even when giving out orders. I exchanged glances with Hermes next to me. No doubt this meant that Ash was involved.

What could it be this time? In regard to the lab’s current tasks, Ash was especially eager for the preserved meals. He must have wanted us to speed up the process. That wasn’t too bad of a request.

I sat up straight in anticipation of Maika’s next words. I kept telling myself that it was going to be all right. However, if it truly were something not worth considering a problem, why make such an ominous face?

“Ash is fired up like never before!”

In an instant, all my Ash-defense mechanisms that I had built up over the two years at the academy were crushed. Maika saying “like never before” was terrifying. If even Maika—who displayed her affection for Ash whenever possible and who had known him longer than any of us—was saying this, then his momentum now must be unprecedented in all of human history. And as the person in charge of the laboratory, I was supposed to face off with this unprecedented Ash.

An effective countermeasure came to mind. What if I put someone else in the line of fi—I mean, what if I delegated the task? Looking around, my gaze fell upon Hermes and Belgo, who looked away just like everyone else. *As expected.*

“What exactly happened?”

As I reluctantly asked for details, Maika promptly started explaining.

“I see... Ajole’s current situation and the relationship between Renge and her childhood friend Suiren struck a chord with Ash,” I summed up what I had understood.

“Wouldn’t it be more accurate to say it hit him like a ton of bricks?”

Stop it, Hermes! That metaphor is too violent. Even if it’s more accurate to describe it like that, at least let me imagine the situation more peacefully!

“Anyway...” I muttered.

As I was trying to mentally escape from reality, Maika came to kick down my dreamy bulwark. *Guards, there’s a rioter! Stop her!* Unfortunately, Maika also slew my brave dreamy guards instantly, saying, “The Territory Reform Promotion Office needs to prepare for battle! We don’t know when Ash might show up at the laboratory! As your chief, I order you to comply with his unreasonable demands!”

“You already know they’re unreasonable?!” I reflexively shouted upon hearing our chief’s first ever real order. Usually, her requests were more like a friend asking for a favor.

With a gentle smile, as if she had just plucked a pretty flower, Maika asked a

question in return. “Is there any chance that the demands will be reasonable coming from a fired-up Ash?”

That sounded strangely persuasive. There had been so many past examples of Ash’s unreasonable demands that I couldn’t even come up with a rebuke.

As I was hanging my head, Hermes patted my shoulder to console me.
Thanks, but I’ll need more than a shoulder pat to cheer up. Get me a drink later.

While I was trying to recover from this blow, Maika continued, “There’s no doubt that the demands will be unreasonable, but I won’t allow anyone to run away!”

“You want us to fight to the last man?” I heard Belgo murmur.

He was right! It was unimaginable to receive such an order at a research lab! Moreover, an order to fight to the last man was never given right from the start unless the military expected demons in numbers capable of tearing down the city walls.

“Say, Maika...I understand that his demands are unreasonable, but...what exactly does he want? At the very least, I want to prepare myself a little bit...”

After hearing my—or I should say, the whole lab’s plea, Maika just nodded slightly. “No idea! I just know he’s reckless!”

At that moment, I understood how a soldier must feel during their last stand.

Maika’s Curiosity

“Welcome back, Lady Maika.”

After I had finished helping my uncle, I rushed back to the Territory Reform Promotion Office, where I met Renge.

“Hi there. Where’s Ash?”

“H-He said that you should be back soon, so he went to prepare tea for the three of us.”

If Ash was serving tea, that usually meant that there were also going to be sweets! Yay!

As I reflexively started grinning, Renge also gave a bright smile. Renge's tendency to look downwards paired with her long bangs made it so her facial expression was always hidden. However, whenever our eyes met or when she was laughing with all her heart, I could tell she was a very beautiful woman.

"Say, Renge."

"Y-Yes? What is it?"

"Could you do me a little favor?"

"Yes? U-Uhm, Lady Maika? Wh-Why are you coming closer?"

Don't worry, I won't hurt you. Heh heh... I just want to lift your bangs a little and take a look at your face. No need to recoil in fear—I won't let you get away.

I cornered her with her back against the wall. It was clear that Renge didn't know how to physically defend herself. I had won the moment I decided to confront her face-to-face.

"L-La-Lady Maika? Wh-What are you doing?!"

This is no big deal. Resistance is futile.

First, I grabbed her right hand, then the left one. I proceeded to press her against the wall.

"Eeep...! Wh-What is ha-happening? People will get the wrong idea if they see us like this..."

She was right. I looked like an evil aristocrat trying to forcefully subdue his maid.

"I'm sure it'll be fine. I'm not going to take off your clothes anyway."

"I-In that case... Wait, no! That's not fine at all!"

Don't be afraid. It'll be over in a second.

With a smile, I blew air onto her bangs to get a good look at her face. And lo and behold...

"I knew it! You're so pretty, Renge!"

She had a slender nose and smooth skin. Her round eyes were cute too.

“N-Not at all! Compared to you, Lady Maika... Uhm, it’s embarrassing... Can you let me go?”

It was almost unfair how cute she looked! Especially with that bright red face!

“I’m jealous! You’re so cute, Renge! And big!”

I was currently pushing her against the wall while holding down both her hands, so we were very close to each other. And since we were both girls, that naturally meant that our breasts were touching. It felt soft. Or squishy? Either way, hers were *big*. Overwhelmingly so. Just like my mom, who was also Ash’s first crush. Did that mean that Ash liked them big?

“What’s your secret, Renge?” *Come on, tell me.* For the sake of love, I would even take advice from an enemy.

“Wh-What secret?!”

The scandalous one that’s currently pressing against my chest.

To be honest, having big breasts would probably be a disadvantage for sword fighting, but putting that aside, winning over Ash was my top priority!

“I don’t have any secrets!”

“Hmm... I see—it’s confidential information. I won’t give up so easily though!”

“L-Lady Maika, calm down! Please calm down! You’re acting a bit—very strangely right now!”

My love for Ash was always at its maximum power!

At that moment, the figure of the person always capable of firing me up even further entered the room.

“What is all this noise? Did something happen?” It was Ash! Upon seeing Renge and me in a presumably compromising situation, he tilted his head. “Are you trying to have your way with her? I cannot turn a blind eye to that as Sir George’s adjutant.”

W-W-Wait! It’s not what it looks like, Ash!

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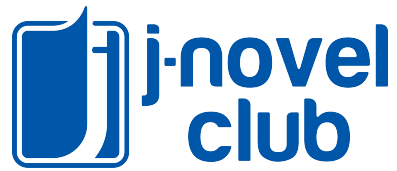
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Fushi no Kami: Rebuilding Civilization Starts With a Village Volume 4

by Mizuumi Amakawa

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